

BASEBALL 2018

SEASIDE

MARCH 26-APRIL 2, 2018
DOUBLE ISSUE
SI.COM | @SINOW

Photograph by
JEFFERY A. SALTER

Illustrated

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STANTON.
JUDGE.

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LINEUP

► MARCH 26–APRIL 2, 2018
► VOLUME 128 | NO. 7



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NOW ON



▼ THE LIN CROWD

SI goes behind the scenes with Nets guard Jeremy Lin in *The Life of Lin*, an exclusive multipart series chronicling his road to recovery after a season-ending knee injury suffered on opening night. In Episode 2, Lin takes viewers along as he pursues his many passions outside of basketball, including his interest in sports analytics and his ownership of an eSports team.



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TAYLOR BALLANTYNE (RIPON)



Figure of Speech

“**IF I KNEW** this was going to happen, I would’ve worn cuter underwear.”

So says U.S. Olympic figure skater Adam Rippon as he shimmies out of his trousers and into a pair of off-the-rack pants in plain view of shoppers at a Saks Fifth Avenue store in New York City. And this is just the opening scene in the first edition of SI TV’s series, *The Big Interview*. The rest is even more revealing.

Each episode in the program features a SPORTS ILLUSTRATED writer interviewing a prominent athlete about his or her sport and personal life, in candid detail. In the debut, SI’s Rohan Nadkarni chats with Rippon about the skater’s favorite shoes (“fun, easy Gucci sneakers”), his dating-app preference (Tinder is “sorta classy,” “Grinder is like trash”) and his feelings about what “makes America awesome.” Visit SI TV on Amazon Channels to check out the Rippon episode, and make sure to come back for more chapters and more big names later this spring.

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LEADING OFF

PARA ACES

L

ET'S FIRST dispense with the medal count. As impressive as it is—36 for the U.S., top of the table, and Dan Cnossen and Oksana Masters, who both compete in both cross-country and biathlon, won 11 of those (six for Cnossen, five for Masters) at the Paralympics in PyeongChang—winning a medal is the least impressive thing a Paralympian does on any given day. Cnossen (*page 24*), 37, a SEAL team commander from Topeka, Kans., is one of 18 military veterans on the U.S. roster. Masters, 28, from Louisville, had already won medals in cycling and rowing at previous championships. The U.S. had never won a medal in biathlon, at the Olympics or Paralympics, until March 10 when Kendall Gretsch, 25, from Downers Grove, Ill., took gold in the sitting biathlon sprint. She was already a three-time world champion in triathlon.

Stephen Hawking, who died on March 14 at age 76, was remembered at the closing ceremony four days later. The wheelchair-bound physicist, who had ALS, was a supporter of the Paralympics and had spoken at the opening of the London Games. “The Paralympic Games is about transforming our perception of the world,” he said. “There is no such thing as a standard or run-of-the-mill human being, but we share the same human spirit.”





SILVER STRIKE

In his fourth Paralympics, Tyler Walker, 31, from Franconia, N.H., won his first medals—both silver, in the slalom and giant slalom.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
LINTAO ZHANG/GETTY IMAGES



ICE GUYS FINISH FIRST

In the final against Canada, Declan Farmer (the alternate captain) scored with 37.8 seconds left to tie the game at one, then won it in OT with 11:30 left.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
BOB MARTIN/OIS/IOC





LEADING OFF

FOLLOW @SPORTSILLUSTRATED





ANGLE OF ATTACK

Stephanie Jallen, 22, from Harding, Pa., raced the Super-G and four other events in South Korea, but didn't land a medal—as she had in Sochi.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOEL MARKLUND/OIS/IOC



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INBOX

FOR MARCH 12, 2018



THE GAME CHANGER

Lee Jenkins's description of the Mavericks' effective use of Dwane Casey's defensive sets during the 2011 Finals was superb reporting. At the time, it seemed incredible that the underdog Mavs, totally outmanned by the Heat's Big 3, came away victorious. I am glad to see Casey [above, center], now the Raptors coach, get the respect he deserves for being the architect of such an effective game plan.

James M. Baker
Rocklin, Calif.

LAW AND DISORDER

I have, until today, been opposed to paying college athletes

beyond providing tuition waivers. But the FBI investigation aptly described by Charles P. Pierce, has forced me to realize that not only has the time come, but it is also long overdue. As a professor [now retired], I received full tuition waivers for my postgraduate degrees and stipends as a teaching assistant. This is standard practice in academia. So the solution is simple. Pay college athletes a similar stipend; they are earning it.

Christopher Kohler
Hertford, N.C.

TOWERS OF POWER

As a 12-year-old girl, I was thrilled that you



devoted so much space to women's basketball. It was very interesting to read about the rapid improvement of forwards in the women's game. My only contention would be that Napheesa Collier should have made SI's All-America Team. She is a huge part of UConn's success and a dominating forward who was not mentioned enough in this article.

Allie Turner
St. Louis

I was baffled by the fact that your women's All-America team, unlike the men's squad, didn't name a coach. If you

needed a nominee, I'd suggest American University's Megan Gebbia. This year she steered the Eagles to a Patriot League championship and their first undefeated home season [13-0, 3-0 in the postseason] since the 1970s.

John M. Vorperian
White Plains, N.Y.

LEADING OFF

You scored an eight-ender with your caption tagline on the photo of **John Shuster and the U.S. curling team** ("It's not shuffleboard!").



As a level one curling instructor, I hear newbies often say curling is like shuffleboard or bowling. On the contrary, it's more like billiards for the bumps and takeouts, or like chess, for the strategy involved in placing your rocks.

Chris Allen Schwanz
Chili, Wis.

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SCORECARD



ESSAY

SEEING RED AGAIN

FIVE YEARS SINCE HIS LAST PGA WIN, TIGER WOODS IS ROARING BACK JUST IN TIME FOR AUGUSTA. SERIOUSLY, WHO ISN'T EXCITED?

► BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG



IN THE Los Angeles Angels' spring training clubhouse this month, the best player in baseball was giddily following a certain PGA Tour star. One day, Mike Trout had almost everybody in the clubhouse watching with him.

The day before North Carolina's men's basketball team began its title defense, coach Roy Williams was glued to his smartphone. There was no doubt why. As Williams began one news conference by saying: "Tiger Woods just birdied a hole. He's the sole leader now at four under par through 16 holes. That's all I got."

And in Sonoma, Calif., the son of a longtime Ping Golf employee could barely contain his excitement. David Griffin calls himself a "greatness groupie," but until last summer, he had a more prominent title: general manager of the

Cleveland Cavaliers. Griffin realized that building a team around LeBron James was an assignment of historical significance. "I felt like we were caretaking for the legacy of Babe Ruth," he says. Griffin understands, as well as anybody, that we are watching the Babe Ruth of golf.

In his last three tournaments, Woods has finished 12th, tied for second, and tied for fifth. Yet he has looked good enough and healthy enough to remind us that there are two kinds of golfers in the world: Tiger, and everybody else.

During the Valspar Championship, which Woods nearly won, so many people tried to watch on the streaming service PGA Tour Live that it crashed. (The Tour cited "unprecedented traffic" and said "roughly 25%" of subscribers lost their connection for 25 minutes.) Says Griffin, "If they had a channel dedicated to Tiger's

ARD



practice rounds at the Masters, it would be the most watched television channel in sports.” The Golf Channel has a popular Twitter feed, @GCTigerTracker, dedicated exclusively to Tiger updates.

When Woods was winning majors—he won 14 from 1997 to 2008—he was the best show in sports. He was longer than any other great player and much better than anybody who hit it as long. He was the toughest, the smartest, the most clutch and more talented than anybody who ever played. And even that didn’t fully explain the phenomenon.

Other golfers looked like walking websites cluttered with too many ads: logos on their hats, collars, chests and sleeves, all for different corporate sponsors. Woods wore one logo, Nike’s swoosh, on all of his clothing. He had muscles to fulfill all the other golfers’ New Year’s resolutions. Once

his round started, he had an uncanny ability to never acknowledge the crowd—not a wink, not a wave, not a smile. He would walk from a green to the next tee, with throngs of people cheering him from either side, and not react at all.

The cumulative effect was stunning. Woods looked like he had dropped in from another planet.

Woods is different now. We know (too much) about his personal struggles. He has struggled for so long to get healthy that even he seemed to wonder if he would ever return. Now here he is, 42 years old, with a fused back, a new swing and that old look.

The club twirls. The magical touch around the green. The scrambles for pars and the tap-in birdies. He will never dominate like he once did, but the 2018 version of Tigermania is like a lot of reunion tours. We don’t ask for new works of genius—just a reasonable copy of the old ones.

There was a time when you could swear that Woods’s tee shots sounded different, and PGA Tour pros would confirm it. He routinely put his drives 30 yards past his playing partners’. Now, the joy of watching Woods is not about length; in a long-driving contest right now, most of the best players in the game—Dustin Johnson, Justin Thomas, Jon Rahm—would be favored over Woods. It’s not even about shot-making. Woods gives people a feeling that no other golfer can provide.

Fans are standing on their toes to get a glimpse of Tiger for the same reason people ignore brilliant works of art in the Louvre so that they can crowd around the Mona Lisa: There is only one like that.

Some Las Vegas oddsmakers have installed Woods as the Masters favorite. That sounds crazy—he hasn’t won a tournament in five years—but don’t you *want* to believe it?

Woods will never win at Augusta by 12 strokes again. He may never be No. 1 in the world again. (He’s now 105th—or 551 spots higher than he was at the end of 2017.) But when he shows up to a tournament saying he expects to win—which is what he has always said, forever—it brings more goose bumps than eye-rolls. If he stays healthy, he can win another major, and after all his surgeries, that would be one of the great sports stories of the decade. The most successful people in sports are riveted. Aren’t you? □



SCORECARD

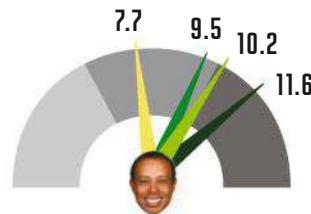
MEDIA

Power Draw

Talk about moving the needle: Tiger's second-place finish at the valspar brought in the best ratings for a nonmajor since 2013. Here is how woods has affected tv ratings at majors over his career

THE MASTERS

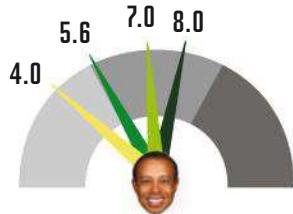
Final rounds, since 1995



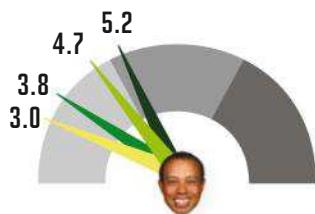
His historic 1997 victory drew 43 million viewers.

U.S. OPEN

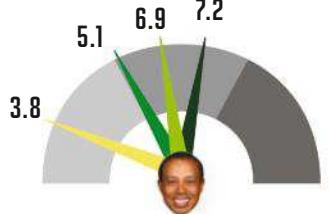
Final rounds, since 1995



The USGA's live stream of the 2008 playoff attracted 2.5 million viewers, a streaming record at the time.

THE OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP

His runaway win in 2000 at St. Andrews, four time zones ahead of the East Coast, still earned a 6.4 rating.

PGA CHAMPIONSHIP

His first majors head-to-head loss, to Y.E. Yang in 2009, still pulled in 10.1 million viewers.

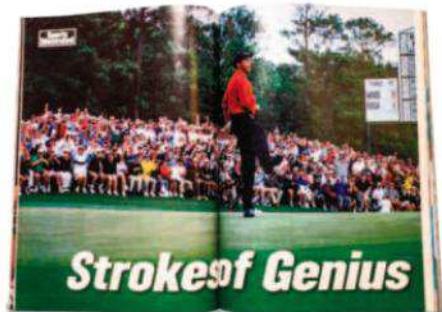
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THEY SAID IT



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Arnold Palmer
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Tiger Woods's south
Florida restaurant,
The Woods Jupiter.



VAULT

TEAM TIGER

WOODS ATTRACTED A GENERATION TO GOLF

► BY CONOR ORR

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S first feature on Tiger Woods appeared in 1991, just weeks before my third birthday. Staff writer Tim Crothers mused then about a 15-year-old poised to be the youngest PGA Tour competitor of all time; a kid who "was dragging behind him a sawed-off putter instead of a rattle" when he was a baby.

Woods became, to me and I'm sure many of my peers, both a living icon and yet accessible enough to influence the sports we played, the confidence we carried and the clothes we wore. Seeing him once again as a favorite

KYODO/AP (MCILROY), CARYN LEVY/PGA TOUR (GETTY IMAGES (HEADSHOT))



The Past Decade

■ ACTIVELY PLAYING

to win the Masters is the ultimate nostalgia hit for a generation of older millennials who are just now realizing that our first sports heroes are retired, restaurant owners, talking heads and professional autograph signers.

His first Masters win in 1997 signaled my own dive into obsession. There was the issue of *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED FOR KIDS* in '96 that included the perforated Woods trading card we all tried to find in mint condition (someone listed one recently on eBay for \$50,000). There were the hours we spent downloading *Tiger Woods PGA Tour* onto our lagging Dell desktops. There were wonderful parents, mine included, who indulged our newfound desire for golf clubs—replete with a stuffed tiger headcover, of course. They took us to public courses, just like Earl had done with his son, watched us hack the place to dust and consoled us when we were frustrated because Tiger made it look so easy.

After Woods's historic win, Rick Reilly wrote about the young phenom's dominance at Augusta (above, left) and foreshadowed 20 more years of golfers chasing their tails in an effort to catch up. Even back then, at the age of nine, I could grasp the gravity of a sentence like this: "Never before had so many people stayed at the course so long, filling the stands behind the practice range, 1,500 strong, to watch a lone player hit thrilling wedge shots under the darkening Georgia sky."

They will again, in just a few week's time, hoping to catch a glimpse of the magic that made him Tiger. □

FROM TOP: JEFF MORELAND/ICON SPORTS/GETTY IMAGES (TIGER CLUB COVER); SANDY HUFFAKER/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES; FLORIDA HIGHWAY PATROL/GETTY IMAGES; JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES; FRED YUCH/GETTY IMAGES; STAN BAIRD/PGA TOUR/GETTY IMAGES; EDIBLE ARRANGEMENTS (APOCALYPSE)



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COINAGE

FOR BETTER, FOR PURSE

AS WOODS'S FAME HAS GROWN, SO HAS PGA PRIZE MONEY



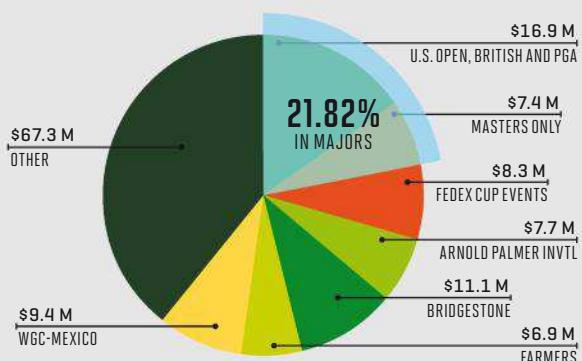
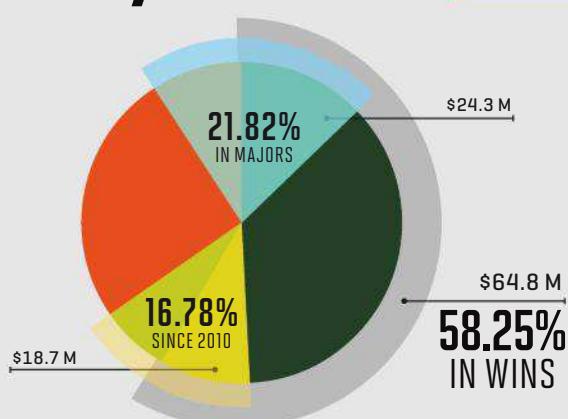
OF THE countless ways to measure Tiger Woods's influence on golf over the last two decades—TV ratings, participation rates, number of stuffed feline headcovers sold—few are quite as dramatic as the growth in PGA prize money. In 1995, the year before Woods made his professional debut, the Tour held 44 events and the combined purse totaled \$62.9 million. By 2000 that number had grown 160%, to \$163.6 million. In fact, after Woods won his first major, the '97 Masters, the Tour's total prize money grew nearly 20% in '98. And the year after that? Almost 40%.

Even when the figures are adjusted for inflation, the

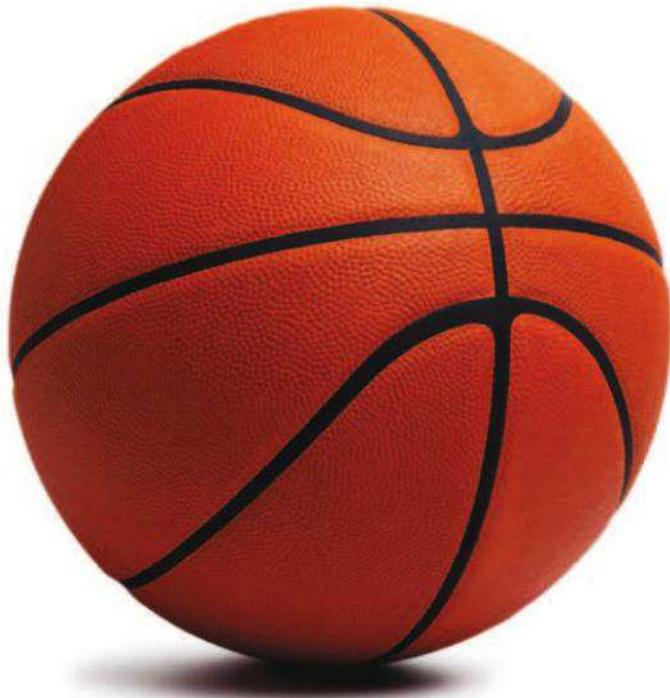
period from 1997 to 2003 represents nothing short of a money explosion, with year-over-year growth in double digits in all but one season. It seems like more than a coincidence that the growth more or less mirrored Woods's prime. By '06 the Tour purse had essentially flattened, according to inflation-adjusted figures, and it actually dropped year-over-year in '09 and '12 (read: financial crisis). But since—with the exception of a dip in '13, a function of the Tour calendar changing, starting the season in October—the money has started to roll in again, thanks not to one game-changing figure but because of the generation he inspired.

Money Matters

BREAKING DOWN TIGER WOODS'S RECORD
\$111.2 MILLION IN CAREER EARNINGS



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BACK IN ACTION

WOODS'S FOURTH SPINAL SURGERY HAS HELPED RELIEVE THE PAIN THAT KEPT HIM OFF THE COURSE FOR YEARS



HIS MEDICAL chart runs long with injuries—a chronically bum knee, problems in both Achilles tendons, an elbow strain, right-ankle pain, a sore neck—but over the last five years, Tiger Woods has been singularly plagued by an ailing back. He underwent three procedures, including two discectomies, to fix a pinched nerve from a herniated disc from March 2014 to October '15, but he still couldn't escape the pain that kept him off the course for more than a year.

Finally last April, Woods underwent surgery—an Anterior Lumbar Interbody Fusion (ALIF)—that has seemed (so far) to relieve much of his discomfort. The procedure, in which the surgeon reaches the lower spine from the front of the body through an incision in the abdomen, restores the height between vertebrae when a spinal disc has become damaged or worn down. It relieves pressure on the nerves, which can send shooting pains down the legs, in a minimally invasive way—which is significant for someone with a history of back surgeries, such as Woods.

“You’re not cutting muscles in the back,” says Andrew Sama, a spinal surgeon at the Hospital for Special Surgery and associate professor at Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City. “You can put a support in the most favorable area of the spine without having to deal with scar tissue near the nerves.”

Using bone grafts in and around the support, the two vertebrae—in Woods’s case, his lowest lumbar and the sacrum—ultimately become fused together and stabilized. So if it looks like Woods is moving more freely on the course, that’s probably because he is.

“When you take away that movement [between the vertebrae] that was causing pain, the patient actually feels like he can move better,” Sama says. □



Presented by



Jon Tattersall, a GOLF magazine Top 100 teacher at FusionATL, shares simple stretches to help maintain a healthy back.



ANKLE OVER KNEE

Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor. Then place one ankle over the opposite knee and gently push that leg away from the body.



COBRA POSE

Lying on your stomach, place your palms down and press them into the ground as you reach your chest forward and up.



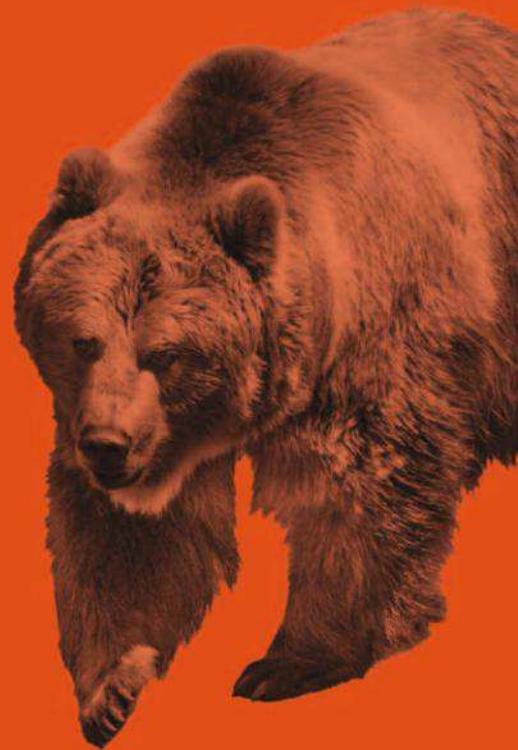
KNEELING LUNGE

From a kneeling position, ground the right foot in front of you. Then lean forward into your right leg while keeping your left knee grounded.



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PARALYMPICS

UP TO THE CHALLENGE

A FORMER NAVY SEAL, WOUNDED IN COMBAT, PUSHED HIS LIMITS IN PYEONGCHANG

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG



AN CNOSSEN won five medals in the Paralympics—one gold, three silver and one bronze—but let's be clear: He does not compete for medals. He competes because he is a sick, twisted individual.

O.K., that was rude. But how else do you explain him? Cnossen says he likes seated cross-country skiing because it is “this ultimate test of how much I can suffer and push through the pain. I don’t care about the results afterward.”

The pain was not the first reason Cnossen started skiing. He started because he lost both legs when he stepped on an IED in Afghanistan as a Navy SEAL in 2009, and as he sat in Walter Reed afterward, he realized he missed two things. One was the outdoors: “I was craving just being in the woods, back in nature.” The second was teammates.

“I probably only realized it after my injury, but I was just so connected to being with SEAL teams,” he says. “It was an honor to be part of that community. I still am a part of it, but it’s not the same. I really was missing that.”

Cnossen was awarded both a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star with Valor from the Secretary of the Navy for his service. After that, he took up cross-country skiing, added biathlon, picked up a master’s degree in public administration from Harvard’s Kennedy School, then decided to shame the rest of us by going for another degree—from Harvard’s divinity school.

GREAT HAUL

Cnossen took gold in the 7.5-km sitting biathlon, one of the five Paralympic medals he won in South Korea.

As you might have gathered, Cnossen is drawn to the tough stuff. It is why he joined the Navy in the first place. The challenge of cross-country skiing with no legs is even more severe than the able-legged can imagine. Cnossen says he is constantly “struggling with one voice saying ‘ease back a little bit’ versus another voice that says ‘go harder.’”

Conditions range from hard to brutal. Cnossen says the 15-kilometer race in PyeongChang, South Korea, on March 11, one day after he won the gold in the 7.5-km seated biathlon, was “the hardest race I’ve ever done.” It was a surprisingly warm day, and you don’t need two degrees from Harvard to understand that heat softens snow, and cross-country skiing across soft snow without legs is a hell of a way to get some exercise.

Cnossen says the race “really buried me.” It took him four days to recover. Of course, during that time, he also won silver and bronze medals (in the sitting middle-distance biathlon and sitting cross-country sprint, respectively).

He was inspired, in part, by the guy who finished that 15-km race ahead of him. Ukraine’s Maksym Yarovyi does not even have the use of his core; Cnossen says, “He is skiing up hills with literally just his arms.”

When the race ended, Yarovyi was hunched over, gasping for breath for many minutes. Cnossen was in awe: “He completely deserves that gold medal.”

Cnossen of all people would know. □



Oksana Masters
U.S. Paralympian,
Nordic Skiing

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FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by JEREMY FUCHS



MELODY KEMPTON

- Basketball
- Post Falls, Idaho

Melody, a 6' 1" senior forward at Post Falls High, scored 13 points and pulled down nine rebounds in a 62-53 win over Eagle High for the state 5A title. On the season she averaged 16.0 points, 8.0 boards and 3.0 blocks. A three-time state high jump champ, Melody will play hoops at Gonzaga.



WADELINNE JONATHAS

- Track and Field
- Gonaïves, Haiti

Jonathas, a sophomore at UMass Boston, set Division III indoor records in consecutive meets, running the 400 meters in 53.70 at the BU Terrier Classic and the 60 in 7.43 at the NEICAAA indoor regionals. She holds D-III outdoor marks in the 200 and the 400.



LAUREN BARBER

- Swimming
- New Wilmington, Pa.

Barber, a junior at Navy, won each of her seven events at the Patriot League championship, setting a conference record in the 200-yard individual medley [1:55.87]. She has swum in 21 league championship events and finished first in all of them, establishing a conference mark.



DIAMOND LEWIS

- Softball
- Los Angeles

Lewis, a freshman third baseman at El Camino College, hit in 18 straight games to start her career, batting .547 with two home runs, 19 RBIs and 16 stolen bases. A two-time all-state pick at Hamilton [Calif.] High, she has also pitched six innings, giving up four runs and striking out two.



LINDSAY REED

- Hockey
- New Vernon, N.J.

Lindsay, a senior goalie at the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Conn., allowed just nine goals over four games to lead Team USA to the U-18 world championship in Dmitrov, Russia. At Hotchkiss she has a 1.94 goals-against average in 16 games. Lindsay will play at Harvard next season.

UPDATE

Striking Out Cancer

Taylor Dockins made FACES IN THE CROWD last June after winning her 104th game on the mound for Norco (Calif.) High, a CIF-Southern Section record. If that weren't impressive enough, she did it less than a year after completing treatment for fibrolamellar hepatocellular carcinoma, a rare liver cancer. A few weeks after the season, though, doctors found three new tumors in her liver. She underwent radiation therapy again, but there are still three spots on her right lung, and she is currently on the liver transplant list. Still, that hasn't stopped Dockins from pitching. The Cal State-Fullerton freshman was the opening day pitcher, throwing six shutout innings against Rutgers. Through nine games she has a 2.75 ERA. Softball keeps her going. "I've watched the Titans play since I was little," she says. "To be on this field, to be playing the game that I love, is amazing." —J.F.



ALL THE FLAVOR WITH A
SMOOTH FINISH



GATORADE *FLOW*

LETTIN' IT FLY FOR CHI

In the program's first trip to the Big Dance since 1985, Ingram had the opportunity to re-create a famous shot from his childhood.

WHY. WE.



What makes the NCAA tournament so captivating? The teams that capture our Madness. The Retrievers, the Wolfpack—and the Ramblers of Loyola-Chicago.

A dynamic photograph of a basketball game in progress. In the foreground, a player in a maroon and gold uniform is in motion, looking towards the right. Behind him, another player in a maroon and gold uniform is also in motion. In the background, a large crowd of spectators is cheering, with many people having their hands raised. The gymnasium floor is polished wood, and the overall atmosphere is energetic and celebratory.

Sports
Illustrated

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•WATCH•

2018



SWEET 16

BY Andy Staples

PHOTOGRAPH BY
GREG NELSON

hearts while busting our brackets—and this year the first two rounds hit Peak go, who don't want to be known as **CINDERELLA** but sure fit the profile



THE NCAA TOURNAMENT'S opening weekend always gives us the team that makes us smile even as it busts our brackets. The team that comes out of nowhere to beat the buzzer and slay the giant. The team that gives us a player who becomes a legend over a few short days in March.

Then the team loses, the Madness ends, the years pass—but still we remember. George Mason. Northern Iowa. Florida Gulf Coast. The name we assign to this team and its predecessors reflects the limited time the players have in the spotlight, as if the clock might strike midnight at any second and. . . .

No, 11th-seeded Loyola-Chicago doesn't want to hear about glass slippers or the team bus turning into a pumpkin. Instead, the Ramblers want you to notice how well they space the floor on offense. They want you to marvel at the way they close out on jump shooters. They want you to see how they can play outside-in or inside-out depending on what the defense gives them. As they prepare to face seventh-seeded Nevada—their lowest-seeded opponent so far thanks to the Wolf Pack's upset of No. 2 seed Cincinnati—in the Sweet 16 in Atlanta, they'd rather inspire *oooooh* than *awwwwww*.

"We're not content," Loyola-Chicago wing Donte Ingram said moments after draining a three-pointer with .3 of a second remaining in Dallas to beat No. 6 seed Miami 64–62 in the first round. "We can win any game we're put in."

"We don't scare you?" asked 6'1", 185-pound guard Clayton

Custer minutes after shooting a 13-foot fade-away and watching from his back as it hit the rim, then the backboard before dropping through the net with 3.6 seconds left for a 63–62 second-round win over third-seeded Tennessee. "I think we're pretty scary."

Maybe so, but thanks to Ingram and Custer—two players who qualify as legends—the Ramblers, more so than UMBC (the first No. 16 seed to beat a No. 1 in 136 tries), Texas A&M (who demolished defending champ UNC), Nevada and the other giant-killing teams of 2018, are the ultimate embodiment of everyone's favorite March fable . . . right down to the dead ringer for the fairy godmother. Let us count the ways.



1. THEY HAVEN'T DANCED IN A WHILE

Loyola-Chicago's last tournament appearance came in 1985, when it reached the Sweet 16 as a No. 4 seed and lost to Patrick Ewing and Georgetown. The Ramblers have won a national title, though it was in another era altogether. Three years before Texas Western started five black players and beat Kentucky for the national title, Loyola started four black players to defeat Cincinnati in the 1963 NCAA final. The Ramblers almost advanced to the Elite Eight by forfeit; Mississippi State had been forbidden by state officials from competing against integrated teams. But the Bulldogs sneaked out to play in East Lansing,

Mich., losing 61–51. The "Game of Change" was a seminal moment in sports, and the current Ramblers embrace their program's role in it.

2. THEY HAVE A COACH WHO'S MAKING AN INSTANT NAME FOR HIMSELF

When the Ramblers hired Porter Moser as coach in 2011, they were circling the drain in the Horizon League. They had one player on the roster from Illinois and barely registered on the radar of Chicago-area recruits. Gentile Arena was a ghost town.

The 49-year-old Moser engaged in what he calls a "grassroots rebuild." His first local recruiting victory, in 2013–14, came in the form of 6' 4" guard Milton Doyle—from Chicago's Marshall High—who helped the Ramblers make the transition from the Horizon League to the Missouri Valley Conference and acted as a pied piper for other players before finishing his career in 2017 and heading to the Long Island Nets of the NBA's G League. One of the players from Chicago who followed was 6' 6" senior wing Donte Ingram, a grad of Simeon High; another was 6' 4" freshman sixth man Lucas Williamson, from Whitney Young High.

Moser also stressed winning pedigrees. Guard Ben Richardson, who signed in 2014, helped Blue Valley Northwest High take two Kansas state titles. And when Custer—Richardson's teammate since third grade—decided to leave after his freshman season at Iowa State, Moser snapped him up, too. Moser's rebuild began showing dividends in his fourth year when the Ramblers went 24–13 and won the 2015 College Basketball Invitational tournament. But they didn't look like a dangerous team this season until Dec. 5, when they prevailed at Florida 65–59. The fans came, too. Home games have become a much hotter ticket. And while the American Airlines Center was dominated by Texas Tech fans, thousands of Loyola-Chicago supporters made the trip with maroon-and-gold scarves that made them look as if they were pulling for Harry Potter to grab the Golden Snitch for Gryffindor.

PERFECT 10's

Jairus Lyles (left) and UMBC pulled off an all-time stunner, routing top seed UVA 74–54, while Caleb Martin hit all three of this threes in OT as Nevada beat Texas.



3. THEY HAVE SOMEONE WHOSE SMILE WINS OVER EVEN THE HARDEST HEART

Do they ever. After taking the job, Moser found a folder on his desk containing a scouting report on his team. The report's author? Sister Jean Dolores-Schmidt, a nun who in 1961 began teaching at Mundelein College, a Catholic school that merged with Loyola-Chicago in '91. Now 98, Sister Jean has served as the team's chaplain since '94 and still compiles scouting reports on all the Ramblers' opponents. She also occasionally asks her boss for favors on the team's behalf. *Please, God, Sister Jean thought as Ingram's final shot against Miami sailed through the air on March 15. Let him make it.*

The day before the Volunteers game, an email from Sister Jean popped into the in-box of each Rambler telling them to watch out

**"YOU'RE GOOD JUMPERS.
YOU'RE GOOD REBOUNDERS.
YOU'RE GOOD AT EVERYTHING."**

—Sister Jean, in a pregame pep talk

ANSWERED PRAYERS

The Ramblers needed last-second buckets to advance in both games, and Ingram (0) and Custer delivered.

while making a layup and hit the free throw to put the Vols up 62–61 with 20.1 seconds remaining. Bone took a three-pointer at the buzzer after Custer gave Loyola-Chicago a one-point cushion. That shot clanged off the rim, and Sister Jean and the Ramblers danced on to the tournament's second weekend.

4. THEY HAVE CATCHPHRASES

The Ramblers have almost too many of them. "No finish line" was the most popular in Dallas, followed closely by "Put it in the bank." They uttered that second one both times tournament officials presented them with a bracket—about the size of one of those giant novelty checks lottery winners get—and asked a player to enter Loyola-Chicago in the next round.

Those two may soon find their way onto a maroon wall in the Ramblers' locker room back home. The Wall of Culture dis-

for forward Admiral Schofield and guards Grant Williams and Jordan Bone. Before tip-off she had more advice: "Don't let the Tennessee team members scare you with their height," she said. "Height doesn't mean that much. You're good jumpers. You're good rebounders. You're good at everything. Just keep that in mind."

Sister Jean nailed her scouting report. Schofield scored 11 points in the game's first five minutes. Williams got fouled



plays phrases Moser has collected during a career that includes head-coaching stints at Arkansas-Little Rock (2000 to '03) and Illinois State ('03 to '07). The period when Moser soaked up the most knowledge came after he was fired at Illinois State and Rick Majerus hired Moser as an assistant at Saint Louis. Majerus died in 2012, but many of his words still live on the Wall of Culture.

They include "When the ball moves, you move" and "Fake a pass to make a pass." About halfway down and just to the right of center is "Give a verbal." This last one came in handy against Miami. It not only instructs players to talk on the court but also directs them to speak in the most efficient manner possible. An open man shouldn't clap, scream or say *Hey! Over here!* He should yell the name of the person who has the ball.

That's precisely what Ingram did as the clock raced toward zero. "MAR-QUES!" he screamed. Did Townes hear it?

"Loud and clear," Townes says. "Loud and clear." Ingram had picked himself up off the ground on the other end of the court following a failed rebound attempt. He had trailed



the break. He had settled on the far left edge of the March Madness logo that adorned midcourt, about five feet from the top of the key. He yelled his roommate's name, and then the ball came. Ingram caught the pass, rose and fired. The prayer was answered.

5. THEY HAVE PLAYERS WHO COULD PLAY FOR A HIGH-MAJOR PROGRAM

Loyola has at least two. The first is Custer, who probably would have done just fine in the Big 12 had he chosen not to transfer. The second is Cameron Krutwig, a 6' 9" freshman from the Chicago suburb of Algonquin, who talks like a senior and frustrates much taller defenders with an array of slick post moves.

Krutwig had about 20 scholarship offers—including from Alabama-Birmingham and Vermont—but he chose to stay close to home because Moser was one of the first coaches to offer him a scholarship and because he clicked with the players. He arrived weighing 260 pounds, lost 30 between May and October, and turned into a stretch four. His ability to pass out of the post has allowed the Ramblers to run their offense through him. This can lead to layups for Krutwig or open threes for the guards. Krutwig scored seven points and dished out four assists against Tennessee, but his biggest contribution was frustrating the inexperienced players who tried to replace injured Tennessee forward Kyle Alexander. That forced the Vols to go small and negated their length advantage.

6. THEY HAVE A HEARTWARMING STORY ON THE COURT

That would be Richardson and Custer, who grew up on the same street in Overland Park. They were sixth-graders when Kansas guard Mario Chalmers hit a three-pointer at the buzzer to force overtime against Memphis in the national title game, which the Jayhawks

went on to win. Nearly every sixth-grader in metro Kansas City wanted to perfect the Chalmers shot. So Richardson would play Sherron Collins and throw the pass. Custer would play Chalmers and sink the shot. Then they'd switch.

They went 94–6 as high school teammates, but they initially went their separate ways for college. After Custer played sparingly in 12 games as a freshman at Iowa State, he decided to reunite with Richardson.

Now, sixth-graders in the Kansas City and Chicago areas will spend hours re-creating Custer's last salvo against Tennessee. "The ball was like it was in slow motion," Custer says. "I'll never forget that feeling, just laying there." Richardson had seen Custer take that specific shot from the right elbow at least a thousand times. Even when it hit the rim first, he didn't worry. "It is fitting that he hits a big shot going one, two, pull-up, like we've been doing in the gym for our whole lives," Richardson says.

THE RAMBLERS have written their names into tournament lore, and they feel they have more to accomplish. As much as they love their team chaplain, they're going to try to bust *her* bracket.

"Sister Jean does have us going out in the Sweet 16," Custer says. "So we have to prove her wrong." □



DENIED

Robert Williams and the No. 7-seeded Aggies put an end to North Carolina's title defense with an 86–65 whipping in the second round.



WHAT'S THE RUSH?

At a subregional jam-packed with NBA-caliber talent, five future lottery picks had just one priority: doing everything they could to keep on dancing

by
DAN
GREENE

It was a typical answer from a savvy athlete who knows better than to say anything that could become bulletin board fodder. During a press conference in Pittsburgh last week, Villanova junior swingman Mikal Bridges was asked about playing in a subregional with so many projected NBA lottery picks, himself included. Bridges replied that at this point every team was great and he was focused on the Wildcats' first opponent, 16th-seeded Radford. A few minutes later Nova coach Jay Wright told the media he'd just run into Bridges in the hallway and learned another motive for his player's answer. "They asked me about the lottery—there's five guys here in the lottery," Bridges told Wright. "I don't even know who they are."

In this regard Bridges was a rarity: When the brackets were revealed, it was clear that high-end pro prospects would be flooding the floor at PPG Paints Arena. Chief among them were Bridges, Duke forwards Marvin Bagley III and Wendell Carter Jr., Oklahoma guard Trae Young and Alabama guard Collin Sexton—all projected as top 10 picks in June's NBA draft (and who, aside from Bridges, are all freshmen). It was an idyll for the forward-looking hoops fan.

But, as Bridges also noted, players try not to look too far ahead. When Carter woke on the day of his tournament debut, "he said he was bubbling with energy, with adrenaline and excitement," says his mother, Kylia. "They are kids—like kids in a candy store." Even Young, who

MARVELOUS
The 6' 11" Bagley connected on 75.0% of his shots in Pittsburgh, scoring 44 points.

has mastered a calm, say-the-right-things posture after being the subject of more frenzied media attention than any player in the



country, was awestruck. Following one Sooners media session, he called his father, Rayford, to gush about his turn at the dais, the locker bearing his nameplate and the dozen reporters who gathered there to pepper him with questions. "Dad," Trae said, "it feels like I'm



the media, this time in an arena hallway. Would he be leaving his native Norman to go to the NBA? "Right now I'm thinking about my teammates," he said, head up and keel even. When the interviews ended, he retreated to the locker room, a heavy door marked with the Sooners' logo swinging closed behind him.

The Blue Devils are unusually young for a Mike Krzyzewski-coached team, with four freshmen starting alongside senior guard Grayson Allen, who warned his precocious running mates against tournament distractions including . . . watching tournament games. Bagley, who in his free time writes and records

six hours before the Tide would close the day's session. "Can you believe this?" she asked. Kylia said she could not. "This is March Madness," Kylia said, "and our babies are playing." Recounting the story later raised new goose bumps across Kylia's skin.

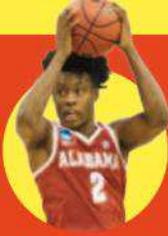
Two days later their sons would leave their first NCAA tournaments



F Wendell Carter Jr.

6'10" Fr., Duke

Averaging 13.6 points and 9.2 boards, he totaled 22 and 10 in two games.



G Collin Sexton

6'3" Fr., Alabama

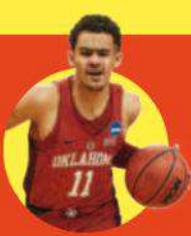
The dynamic threat had 42 points on 50.0% shooting in two games.



G-F Mikal Bridges

6'7" Jr., Villanova

He poured in a game-high 23 points in the win over Bama, 22 of them after halftime.



G Trae Young

6'2" Fr., Oklahoma

The nation's leader in scoring and assists, he had 28 and seven in the loss to URI.

Young's lottery-bound brethren had more reason to celebrate, even if it was sometimes against their will. On March 14, Duke held a team dinner at Morton's, the upscale steakhouse chain, on what happened to be Bagley's 19th birthday. Though Bagley sheepishly insisted they not commemorate the occasion, a waiter emerged with a lava cake à la mode. Soon the whole room was breaking out in song. "We embarrassed him a little bit," says freshman guard Mike Buckmire.

rap music under the moniker MB3FIVE, said he hadn't had time in Pittsburgh to pen so much as a bar. By the Saturday morning of the Round of 32, Kylia Carter said Wendell had been so busy with game prep she'd only seen him twice in four days, despite staying in the same hotel.

Kylia did get to spend time with Gia Sexton, mother of Alabama's Collin, whom she befriended while their sons' paths crossed on the AAU circuit. They sat together during Duke's game on Thursday, some

on divergent paths. Kylia's Wendell was on the right side of an annihilation, scoring 13 points in 19 minutes of an 87–62 win over Rhode Island. Gia's Collin, who had a front tooth knocked loose by an elbow in a first-round defeat of Virginia Tech, spent the last five minutes of his tournament cheering from the bench after being called for a technical foul in an 81–58 loss to Villanova.

They may meet again in a green room, babies no more. □

already in the league." Alas, Young would be the first among the group forced to consider his next destination. Despite his 28 points and seven assists, Rhode Island knocked off Oklahoma 83–78 in overtime, and so some 24 hours after that call to Rayford, Trae again held court with



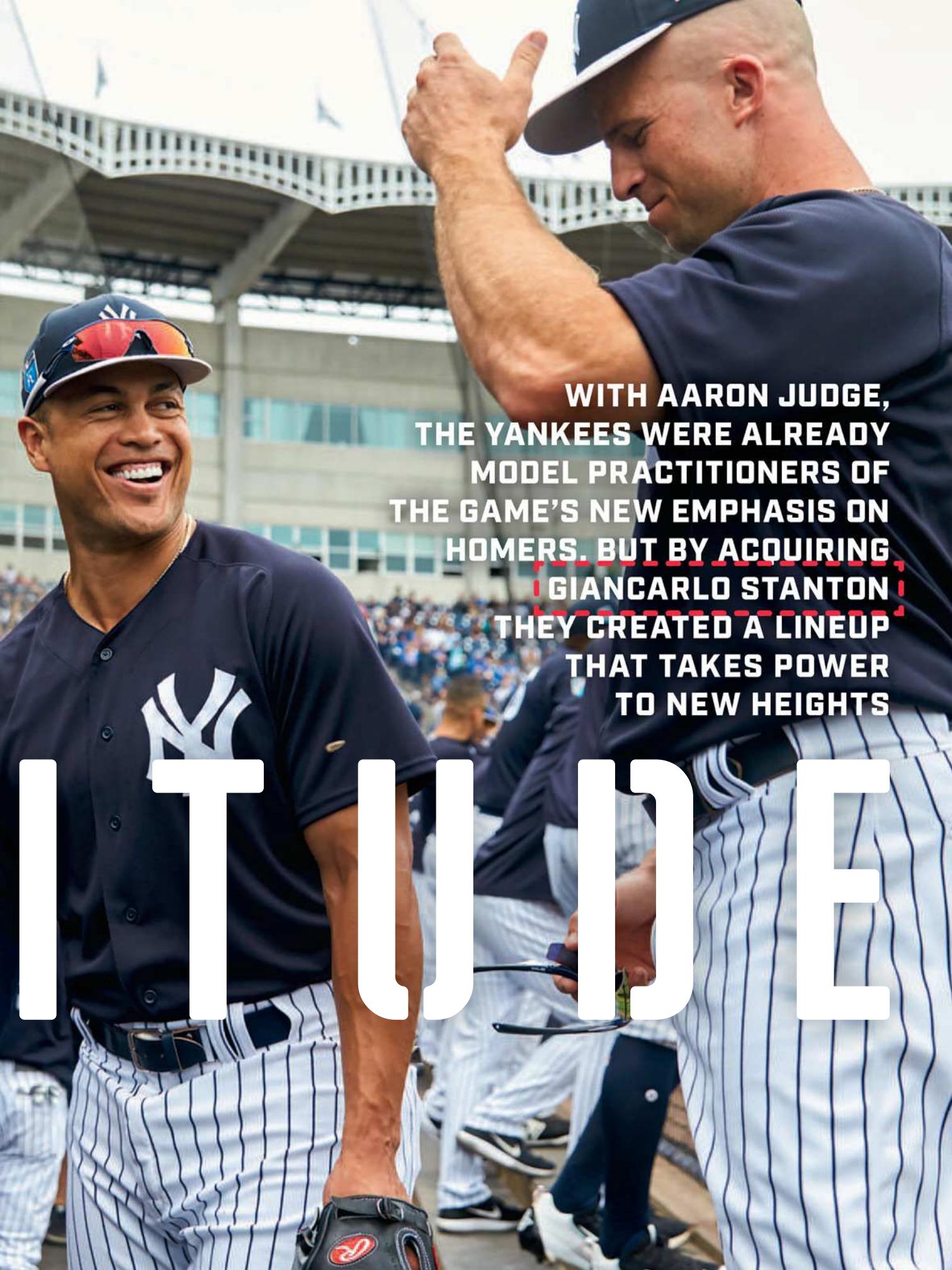
HITTING IT BIG

Stanton (center) will make a lineup with leadoff man Brett Gardner and Judge (left) even more potent.

AN AMPED-UP ADJUSTMENT

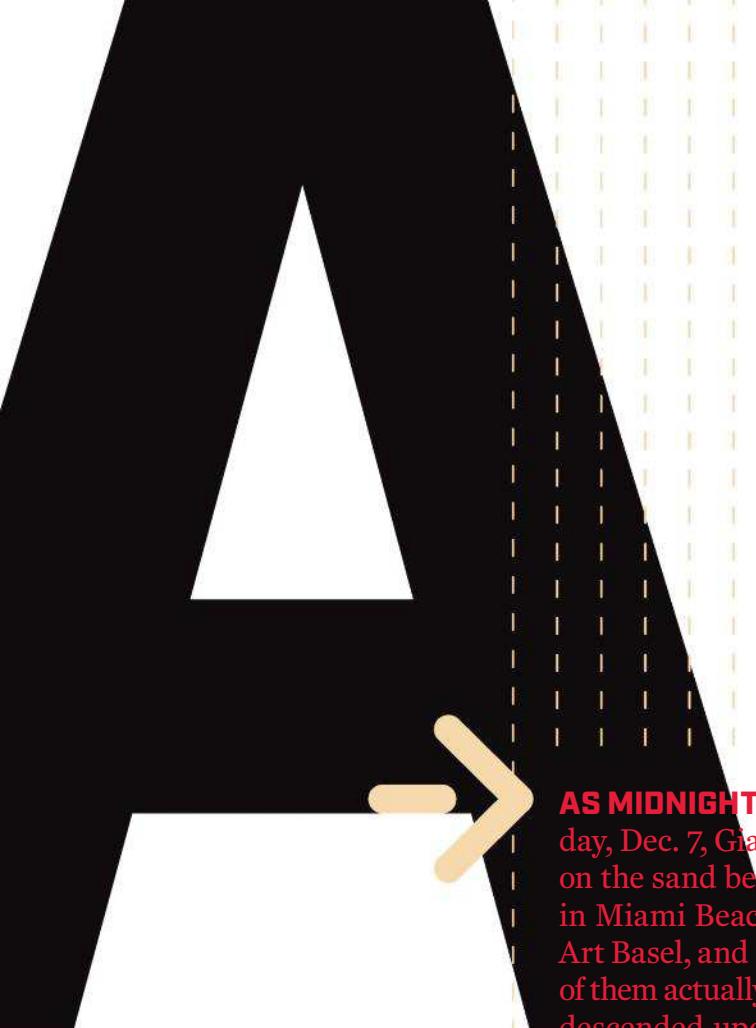
BY BEN REITER

Photographs by ROB TRINGALI

A composite image featuring two New York Yankees players. On the left, Aaron Judge is laughing heartily, wearing a dark navy blue jersey with the 'NY' logo and light blue pinstripe pants. On the right, Giancarlo Stanton is shown from the side, wearing a dark navy blue shirt and a dark cap, pointing his index finger upwards. The background shows the interior of a baseball stadium with spectators.

WITH AARON JUDGE,
THE YANKEES WERE ALREADY
MODEL PRACTITIONERS OF
THE GAME'S NEW EMPHASIS ON
HOMERS. BUT BY ACQUIRING,
GIANCARLO STANTON,
THEY CREATED A LINEUP
THAT TAKES POWER
TO NEW HEIGHTS

JUDGE



STANTON'S GAZE, though, kept drifting to the Atlantic, and its waves, rhythmically crashing against the shore. He loved living in Miami, loved its food, its weather, its cosmopolitanism. Now he craved something he knew this city would never provide him: consistency.

Miami had certainly given him the type of personal success the son of Southern California postal workers could once never have imagined. Three winters earlier, when he had just turned 25, the Marlins signed him to what remains the richest contract in sports, \$325 million to be paid over 13 seasons. The previous month, he had been named the National League's MVP, after batting .281 with 59 home runs and 132 RBIs. He was grateful for all of it. But it felt empty.

Each of his eight seasons had begun with new promises. He had played under eight different managers and eight different hitting coaches, each with his own philosophy, his own rules. Some years, the players had to be

AS MIDNIGHT approached on Thursday, Dec. 7, Giancarlo Stanton stood on the sand behind the Faena Hotel in Miami Beach. It was the week of Art Basel, and 82,000 visitors, some of them actually interested in art, had descended upon his adopted home city. Beautiful people in asymmetric, tailored clothing lounged beneath red-and-white-striped umbrellas and gawked at the woolly mammoth skeleton—coated in 24-karat gold by the artist Damien Hirst—that had, thanks to a \$15 million investment by one of the Faena's oligarchical co-owners, spent the most recent two of its 10,000 years of rest in a glass coffin on the hotel's manicured grounds.

clean-shaven and wear suits on road trips. Some years, anything went. The result was always the same: more losses than wins, followed by new faces and new promises. "It was all irrelevant crap, extra stuff that we had to worry about that had nothing to do with anything on the field," Stanton says. "What's the new circus today?"

During All-Star Games and the World Baseball Classic, his temporary teammates always asked him the same question: What's going on down there? "You laugh it off for a while," Stanton says. "Then you start thinking, Are you part of that mess? Are you the face of what everyone is laughing about? It didn't sit well with me for a while—for years. Then it started to really burn me up inside. I asked myself, If your career ended tomorrow, what can you take away from it, besides a few individual accomplishments?"

The only consistency was upheaval. That was why, even as the Marlins offered him the biggest contract in sports history after the 2014 season, he had stared down owner Jeffrey Loria and team president David Samson and demanded a two-part insurance policy. It wasn't in case disaster struck. "It was for the inevitable," he says. One part was an opt-out clause, which he could trigger after 2020. The other was a full no-trade clause, so that, if their new promises didn't come to fruition, they couldn't just deal him somewhere he didn't want to go, as they had so many of his teammates.

In September 2016, after the second year of Stanton's contract, the Marlins' season ended not just in tumult, but also in tragedy. Three

miles south of the beach on which Stanton stood, 24-year-old pitcher José Fernández died in a late-night boating accident, his body filled with alcohol and cocaine. Stanton and the rest of the Marlins lost a friend, an irrepressible presence who chattered and laughed all day long, even in the midst of yet another one of his double-digit strikeout games. The team spent the final week of the season crying in the clubhouse. Once the season ended, they realized they also might have lost their future. "You need a pitcher like that, who is going to dominate like he can," Stanton says. "You're not going to have everyone



play O.K., pitch O.K., and win the World Series. We needed him.”

Once, when Fernández was in the middle of his own acrimonious contract negotiation with Loria and Samson, he had sidled up to Stanton during batting practice and outlined an alternate future for the two of them. “I want to be here, but I know how things are, and I know how these guys work,” Fernández said. “If it doesn’t work out, I’m going to go to New York and play with the Yankees, and you’re coming with me.”

Maybe you, Stanton thought. I’m here through 2020, and probably my whole career. He hadn’t yet given up hope of winning in Miami. He loved his teammates, like fellow young outfielders Marcell Ozuna and Christian Yelich and second baseman Dee Gordon. Even after Fernández’s death, Stanton believed the team could win with them. Last August, when Derek Jeter and the venture capitalist Bruce Sherman agreed to buy the club from Loria for \$1.2 billion, he thought it might represent the final fresh start the Marlins needed. “I was happy,” he says. “All you knew about Jeter was the winning background, the winning culture. We were all pumped to hopefully get things going in the right direction, to finally give



WELCOME NEWS

Judge was one of the first to be told that Stanton [27] would be suiting up in the Bronx.



some respect to our organization.”

Then he learned that Jeter’s plan involved only more upheaval—the immediate slashing of the payroll of an organization that lost \$50 million in 2017 and had one of the league’s worst farm systems, in order to rebuild it from the studs. That meant that teammates

would likely soon be traded. With \$295 million remaining on his contract, so would he—but only if he agreed to the destination.

As he stood on the beach on Dec. 7, his phone rang. It was his agent, Joel Wolfe.

“You’re not going to believe this, G, but we got a deal,” Wolfe said. “The Yankees.”

“Let’s do it,” Stanton said.

“You sure you don’t need a night to sleep on it?”

“If you want me to take a night, I’ll take a night,” Stanton said. “The answer’s going to be the same. Do it.”

N THE 6' 6", 245-pound Stanton and the 6' 7", 282-pound Aaron Judge, the Yankees enter the 2018 season with a lineup centered around what could be history's most powerful duo, and the potential for enlisting a new type of sponsor for a pregame giveaway, a maker of earplugs. Judge hit 52 home runs as last year's American League MVP runner-up, and just one pair of teammates has ever exceeded the 111 bombs Stanton and Judge combined for in 2017: the Yankees' Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle, who slugged 115 in 1961. The Yankees have one player to thank, aside from Stanton, for their 13 feet of *oomph*. Despite conspiracy theorists who insist that he wanted to send a final parting gift to his club of 20 seasons, it's not Derek Jeter. It's Shohei Ohtani.

As the winter began, every team, aside from perhaps the Marlins, covetted the 23-year-old Japanese star, not only for his two-way skills but also for his artificially low price tag (see page 62). Due to the league's new collective bargaining agreement, Ohtani could only command a one-time signing bonus of a few million dollars, and then an annual salary at the league minimum of \$545,000. Ohtani made clear that he would only sign with a club that would both use him on the mound and commit to giving him regular at bats. When Yankees general manager Brian Cashman looked at a lineup that was already packed with power, with potential 30-home-run hitters not just in right (Judge) but at catcher (Gary Sanchez), first base (Greg Bird) and shortstop (Didi Gregorius), he saw one open spot, at designated hitter. As the offseason commenced, he saved that spot for Ohtani.

Even so, at the league's GM meetings in Orlando in mid-November, Cashman laid the groundwork for a significantly more expensive Plan B. After one session, he tapped Michael Hill, whom Jeter had retained as the Marlins' GM, on the shoulder. They took a walk on the grounds of the hotel. "I know we're probably a dark horse on Stanton," Cashman said. "None of it is possible until the Ohtani thing plays out. We could become players."

In early December, Cashman learned that Ohtani would not be signing with a team east of the Mississippi River, nor one that con-

ducted spring training in Florida. The Yankees satisfied neither requirement, and Ohtani eventually signed with the Angels. So Cashman began to try to figure out how to fill his DH spot with a player who might end up costing more than 50 times his preferred option.

Meanwhile, Hill had worked on potential trades for Stanton with two other clubs, pending Stanton's approval. Stanton met with representatives from both the Cardinals and the Giants in Los Angeles, his hometown and where he spends his winters, partially to see what they had to say but also to experience, for the first time in his life, what it was like to deal with front offices other than the Marlins'. "They've won recent championships, they know how it's done, they're storied franchises," he says. "I really just wanted to see what everyone was talking about. How an organization should be run. I was curious. All I'd ever had was just peeking over the wall."

He came away impressed, but still: As many as 10 years of his life hung in the balance, possibly the rest of his career. He wanted to go where he wanted to go. And, as he and Wolfe had told Hill, he wanted to go to one of four teams that promised not just the long-term stability he'd never had but also immediate success: the Astros, Cubs, Dodgers or Yankees. "Those were the young teams that were ready to win now, and were headed in the right direction," Stanton says.

On Dec. 5, Stanton met the Marlins' new owner, face-to-face, for the first time. He flew to Miami and sat down in the manager's office in Marlins Park across from both Jeter and Hill. He told Wolfe to stay home. "I didn't want any proper business talk, any buffering," he says. "Let's just get it out, raw, the real s---."

First, he made one final plea to Jeter to invest in a club that, with him and Gordon and Ozuna and Yelich, had finished fifth in the National League in runs, and second after the All-Star break. Lacking Fernández, they might only need a couple of free-agent pitchers to contend. "Give it one half of the season," Stanton said. "If we aren't right there with the Nationals, or right there in the wild-card race, then you can deal everybody."

Jeter and Hill weren't buying it. They told Stanton he had two options. They had worked hard to come

BY THE NUMBERS

111

Total home runs hit by Giancarlo Stanton [with Miami] and Aaron Judge [with New York] in 2017.

115

Total home runs hit by the Yankees' Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle in 1961—most ever by a pair of teammates.





to terms with the Cardinals and the Giants. He could pick one of them, and soon, or he could stay in Miami as they traded away all of his friends and teammates. They had no other choice, and it wasn't personal. It was business.

"This is not going to go how you guys think it will go," Stanton said. "I'm not going to be forced somewhere, on a deadline, just because it's convenient for you guys. I've put up with enough here. Derek, I know you don't fully understand where I'm coming from. But Mike does. He's been here. He can fill you in. This may not go exactly how I planned. But it's definitely not going to go how you have planned."

After half an hour in the manager's office, the trio emerged. Jeter and Hill still hoped that Stanton would agree to go to San Francisco or St. Louis. But Hill also figured that he had better get on the phone with the man who had tapped him on the shoulder back in Orlando.

While Cashman knew that he was contending with a smaller field of bidders than he had for Ohtani—just three—the prospect of acquiring Stanton carried with it another consideration. For the 15th straight season, the Yankees had been required to pay a luxury tax penalty to their rivals for exceeding a collectively bargained payroll

threshold—their payments to the rest of the league have totaled \$341 million since 2003—and Cashman and the club's owner, Hal Steinbrenner, had vowed to stay below the \$197 million limit in 2018.

"We're tired of paying our competitors so that they can acquire more weapons to compete against us," Cashman says. He worked with Hill to arrive at a deal that would allow the Yankees' projected payroll to remain below that \$197 million, even after adding a player who was

due to earn \$25 million in 2018. If the Marlins took back second baseman Starlin Castro, who was owed \$10 million for '18, and also agreed to send \$30 million cash to New York, they could do it. All that was left to determine were the prospects the Yankees would surrender along with Castro. They agreed on Jorge Guzman, a pitcher in rookie ball. "I could tell it was going to happen," Cashman says. Then, after debating a long list of names, they settled on the second prospect: 18-year-old middle infielder Jose Devers.

Wolfe got the news, and called Stanton. Then Stanton rejoined his best friends A.J. Ramos of the Mets and Ricky Nolasco of the Royals, pitchers who had once been traded away from the Marlins, as he now had. As Damien Hirst's golden mammoth glowed, they lifted a bottle of tequila that retails for \$135 to the Miami sky. Hirst had titled his work *Gone but not Forgotten*.

THERE WAS a third player, besides Stanton and Ohtani, who could have prevented Stanton's arrival in New York. Although Aaron Judge had only just completed his rookie season with the Yankees, he was the team's centerpiece, and now Cashman was on the verge of acquiring a player who not only possessed many of his same skills but also played the same position, rightfield. Judge was signing autographs at a hotel when Cashman called him on the morning of Dec. 8. "We have a deal in place to acquire Giancarlo Stanton," Cashman told Judge. "That would mean that you might have to bounce around from rightfield to DH at times. Are you willing to do that?"

"If he was really against making any type of adjustment or sacrifice, or if it bothered him that any of this



would be taking place, then it would probably have impacted my decision to move forward on it," says Cashman. "He'd acquired enough capital here that I would have had to reassess things and maybe seen if Stanton would have been willing to be a pure DH at all times. We're dealing with human beings, and buy-in, open-mindedness and willingness to adjust are important ingredients."

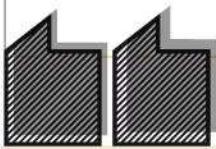
Judge's answer came without hesitation. "We have the chance to add the NL MVP to our team? Yeah, we gotta get that done," he said. "I'm all in, Cash."

"People always say we're very similar," Stanton says, and his first spring training with Judge only confirmed that for him. Both are reserved and immensely strong

As for their positions, Stanton says, "Both of us prefer to play in right, but we also both prefer to help the team. My responsibility is to try to fit in, rather than try to come in and take over. That's not my nature."

Although his size, skills and salary have long set Stanton apart, what he always desired was to fit in on a winning team, with consistent faces, rules and philosophies. He believed he had found that in Miami, with Gordon and Ozuna and Yelich—as well as first baseman Justin Bour and catcher J.T. Realmuto—but it was not to be. Jeter and Hill had traded Gordon to the Mariners, and with Stanton gone, dealt Ozuna to the Cardinals and Yelich to the Brewers.

"I miss playing with them," Stanton says. "We came



"I'M NOT GOING TO BE FORCED SOMEWHERE," STANTON TOLD JETER AND HILL, "BECAUSE IT'S CONVENIENT FOR YOU. I'VE PUT UP WITH ENOUGH HERE."

Californians. "Both got the same look. Freckles, skin tone, body," says Stanton.

While one of the things that attracted Stanton to the Yankees was their stability—they haven't had a losing season since 1992—they do have a new manager. Cashman let Joe Girardi go last fall after a decade at the helm. "On basically my first day on the job, Cash called me into his office and said, 'I think we got Stanton,'" says new skipper Aaron Boone. "I was like, 'Huh. Good first day here.'"

One of Boone's early challenges will be to figure out how to slot both Judge and Stanton into his lineup every day. He says that he will most often play one in right and one at DH, though he also envisions occasions when he'll put one in leftfield—he's not yet sure which one. Still, Boone believes each will benefit from the presence of the other, because pitchers will likely try to attack them in the same ways and because there are few other hitters on the planet who know what it is like to try to maintain consistent swing mechanics with behemoth bodies like theirs.

Stanton agrees. "We'll have to watch how they approach us, because it's going to be similar," he says. "There's going to be a lot of learning each other's games, and helping each other when we're in the thick of it."



up as youngsters together, helped each other grow into the game. You watch those guys get better, you watch them struggle. We had some good times. We knew what we had with that lineup."

It was, Stanton will always believe, a World Series nucleus, one that is now scattered across the league. While he will room in New York City with Ramos—now the potential closer for the crosstown Mets—he will have to keep track of the rest of his former teammates from afar.

Stanton insists he bears no ill will toward Jeter and has only one wish for his stewardship of the Marlins. It relates to the \$2.5 million, seven-story-tall home run installation by pop artist Red Grooms, which sits beyond the left centerfield wall in Marlins Park and which Stanton set into marlin-diving, water-spraying motion 112 times over the past six years, more than twice as often as anyone else. Stanton, in fact, has by himself been responsible for 31% of its activations, which come whenever a Marlin hits a homer.

"I can't stand that sculpture," he says. "I never liked it. I hope Jeter takes it down. He said he wants to. I hope he does. All it does is suggest that this place is a circus, and we're the main attraction."

"The circus is over now." □

1/2 THE SUGAR. ALL THE ELECTROLYTES.

MADE



FOR

THIS™



SWING ANGLE 80°

NUMBER OF HITS:

DONALDSON

● 100	● 40
● 80	● 20
● 60	● 0
● Batted Balls	
● Hits	

80°

40°

20°

0°

-20°

-80°



UPPERCUT BY UPPERCUT, A BAND OF SLUGGERS—AND THE
RESHAPING THE MODERN SWING. OUT: THE LI

→ BY TOM VERDUCCI

Photographs by TOM SZCZERBOWSKI/GETTY IMAGES (DONALDSON) & TIM CLAYTON/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES (GALLO)



80° SWING ANGLE



NUMBER OF HITS:
GALLO

30	15
25	10
20	5

Batted Balls ●
Hits ●

PLANE AND SIMPLE

The strokes of Donaldson (far left) and Gallo mirror a pitch's downward path, staying "on plane" through the hitting zone.

OFF

IR FREETHINKING, DATA-DRIVEN GURUS—ARE RADICALLY NER UP THE MIDDLE. IN: THE DEEP FLY BALL!

-80°

DEEP THINKERS

By changing his approach, Turner (right) became one of the game's most reliable sluggers, while Gallo (below, center) was all or nothing in his first full season.



THE 1-AND-2 pitch to Rangers slugger Joey Gallo last Sept. 17 didn't signify the start of a revolution—it was more the Second Battle of Saratoga than Lexington and Concord. The first shots had come a few years earlier, igniting the greatest hitting rebellion since Babe Ruth (more or less) invented the home run. What happened on this pitch in Anaheim would confirm the strength of the revolutionary forces.

THE DELIVERY FROM

Angels righthander Garrett Richards was most likely to be a slider: He used that pitch 75 of 178 times with two strikes last season, giving up just two singles. Behind him, the shortstop crouched near second base, the second baseman in short right-field and the first baseman far in back of the bag. To crack this analytics-crafted cordon with an opposite-field ground ball would require the exactitude of Tom Cruise in the vault scene from *Mission: Impossible*, especially for Gallo, a 6' 5" lefthanded, launch-happy first baseman. In 2017 he swung at 1,056 pitches. Only once—a certifiable mistake—did he ground a single to left.

A generation ago a batter facing a 1-and-2 pitch would shorten his stroke to *put the ball in play*. Only four years ago he would be *quick to the ball by getting on top of it with a steep swing path*—the approach he had taken



repeatedly in practice to fire shots with the trajectory of a clothesline at the back net of the batting cage.

Not now. Not since the early adapters and the quants learned that much of the orthodoxy of hitting was stone-cold wrong. A steady decline triggered by more stringent performance-enhancing drug testing had sent offenses into a tailspin.

By 2014, runs and batting average were at their lowest since the introduction of the DH, in 1973.

Then came the revolution—an insurgency waged in the air. In just three seasons, from 2015 to '17, batters hit 3,023 fewer ground balls and 1,196 more home runs, including a record 6,105 dingers last year. There were 3,157 more fly balls and few complaints about the tariff for all that lifting: 2,658 more strikeouts. Teams scored 4.65 runs per game in '17, up from 4.07 in '14.

Baseball is supposed to ebb and flow like the tides;





change, moment to moment, is often barely perceptible. But this? This was the Angel Falls of change, a stupendous cascade. The traditional tenets of hitting flipped quickly.

Be quick to the ball? No. Get ready early and slowly tip the bat back before firing.

Get on top of it? No. Use a slightly upward path to strike the bottom third of the ball.

Hit the fastball out front and the breaking ball deep? No. Do the opposite.

Hit the ball to the back of the batting cage? No. Hit it toward the top.

Just put the ball in play? No. Always try to get it in the air, even at the risk of whiffing.

A confluence of three forces has changed offenses radically: technology, analytics and failed ballplayers turned private hitting tutors—the veritable garage-and-basement indy start-ups of this disruption. Among them: a 71-year-old college dropout cum surfer, a former high school coach, a failed independent league player, a self-taught Internet baseball junkie and a .204 hitter who was released from Class A ball after just two seasons and four home runs. Not a major league at bat among them.

They have something else in common: freedom from

industry bias. Hitting concepts were once passed down like stories at the Thanksgiving table, generation to generation. These outsiders have instead used technology not just to educate themselves but also to disseminate their message, guiding the celebrated midcareer breakthroughs of J.D. Martinez, Justin Turner, Josh Donaldson and Jake Marisnick—to name just a few.

Gallo never had to change. He was skying balls before it was cool. As a kid in Las Vegas he fell under the tutelage of Mike Bryant, the father of one of his travel teammates and best friends, Kris Bryant, now the Cubs' third baseman. In 1980 and '81, Mike hit .204 in the Red Sox' system before they released him—but that came after Ted Williams imparted to him the importance of hitting the ball in the air with a slightly upward swing path.

"When I was eight years old, Mike was teaching me to hit the ball to the top of the cage, but not by dropping my shoulder," Gallo says. "It was more backspinning the ball. With every coach I had besides Mike, we were hitting ground balls to shortstop as a lefty, or as a righty hitting them to second base. A lot of those guys are in

the minors now. They still have that same kind of swing, and they're trying to change. But for me, I always had that [loft]. I kind of credit my career to Mike. We were at the beginning of that new-era hitter."

Last season Gallo went deep 41 times, joining Reggie Jackson, Ken Griffey Jr. and Hal Trosky as the only lefthanded hitters to surpass 40 in the American League by age 23. Bryant has mashed 94 homers in his first three seasons, sixth most in National League history.

Says Bryant of his father, "He got it early. I'm sure if he wasn't in the Red Sox organization with access to [Williams], I don't know if he'd be teaching this way, or at all. It's so funny. Back then it was, 'Mike Bryant, he doesn't know what he's doing.' Now everybody is saying exactly what my dad said."

RICHARDS THREW his slider down and in, as confidently as British general John Burgoyne must have been when he decided to test the Continental Army at Saratoga. Gallo is the King of Loft. No qualified hitter last year connected with a higher average launch angle (the trajectory of the ball off the bat) than Gallo's 22.3 degrees—more than twice



the major league mean. He batted .458 on balls in the air and .164 on balls on the ground. Only Matt Carpenter of the Cardinals (73.1%) got the ball airborne more often than Gallo (72.1%).

Gallo's approach at 1 and 2 was the same as when he first stepped into the box, the same one he learned in Mike Bryant's cage: backspin the tar out of the ball and send it skyward to centerfield. Such intransigence also is why he has struck out 272 times in his first 198 career games, more than anybody in history except one of his contemporaries, Twins third baseman Miguel Sanó. Over three seasons Gallo has a .201 average. "A lot of people disagree with that approach," he says, "and I get bagged on a lot for that, but that's just how I am. I'm going up there and taking my 'A' swing every time."

losopher, than legendary hitting guru Charley Lau. "From the '60s through the '80s things didn't change much, with the bat in and out of the zone quickly. In the '90s things started changing a bit. Within just the last three years we've seen incredible change because of technology. Baseball always has changed. But now that change is coming faster."

IMAGINE A globe hanging in front of home plate, and a hitter swinging a sword at it, envisioning its core as the sweet spot of contact. Tradition-

ally, a batter would be trained to bring his hands from their starting position toward the globe as quickly as possible in a direct, downward line. He'd try to strike the globe with the sword just north of the equator, con-

SWING EVOLUTION



**A DECADE-BY-DECade
LOOK AT SOME OF THE
MOST INFLUENTIAL
STROKES IN
BASEBALL HISTORY,
INCLUDING THE
SIZE OF EACH
PRACTITIONER'S
TYPICAL BAT**

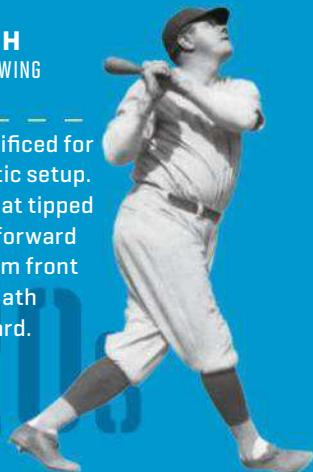


TY COBB
PLAYING PEPPER
[34.5", 44 OZ.]

Erect setup with feet close together. Huge hitch. Bat held with hands apart at first, then together in load position. Barrel stayed flat.

BABE RUTH
THE HOME RUN SWING
[36", 42 OZ.]

Contact sacrificed for power. Athletic setup. Low hands, bat tipped as a trigger, forward stride to a firm front side. Swing path slightly upward.



As Gallo uncoiled, a huge and growing army of kids were mimicking his stroke in batting cages, the tops of which either had rings dangling as targets or a bright line 17 feet away to mark the impact of a ball launched at 25 degrees, the sweet spot for a homer. They were batting off "Launch Angle" tees designed to expose the bottom of the baseball as the ideal contact point. They were paying \$100 an hour for lessons, wielding \$400 metal bats outfitted on the knobs with \$150 swing analyzers and connected to \$20,000 motion detection systems.

"I think we are at the beginning," says Craig Wallenbrock, the former surfer who is more likely to quote Wu Li, a 17th-century Chinese painter, priest and phi-

tinute down to the sweet spot at the core and then turn upward after contact—exiting the other side of the globe still in the Northern Hemisphere, without the sword ever crossing the equator. Hitting instructors called this the classic "in and out" swing path.

As recently as 2013, in comments to Fangraphs.com, then Tigers hitting coach Lloyd McClendon and Red Sox assistant hitting coach Victor Rodriguez recommended this downward trajectory. McClendon: "You want to focus on the top half of the ball . . . and work your hands down through the ball." Rodriguez: "You want a direct path to the ball and to hit the top part." The idea was that you could enhance distance by imparting backspin

if you clipped the ball just right—like a wedge hitting a golf ball and then the turf. McClendon and Rodriguez were not just any hitting coaches: They worked for the two highest-scoring teams in baseball that year.

This technique was standard practice. It also created a small window for optimal contact because the bat was in and out of the strike zone quickly. The average MLB fastball starts out six feet, one inch off the ground at 92.5 mph. By the time it reaches home it typically is two feet, seven inches off the ground and traveling at 85.2 mph. The drop of 42 inches creates a six-degree angle of decline. (Curveballs drop by at least 10 degrees.) A downward swing to meet a dropping pitch often produces contact on the top of the ball, resulting in grounders, which are outs 75.5% of the time.

marveled at the turnaround of Astros teammate Jason Castro. A .235 batter with little pop, he was blossoming into an All-Star catcher who would belt 18 home runs.

Then, watching the stroke of Brewers outfielder Ryan Braun, Martinez made a connection: It was the same as Castro's. Their bats didn't follow a steep path down to the ball; they were "on plane"—that is, mirroring the path of the pitch. Imagine the globe again: In the swings Martinez was watching, the barrel entered through the Southern Hemisphere and exited in the Northern.

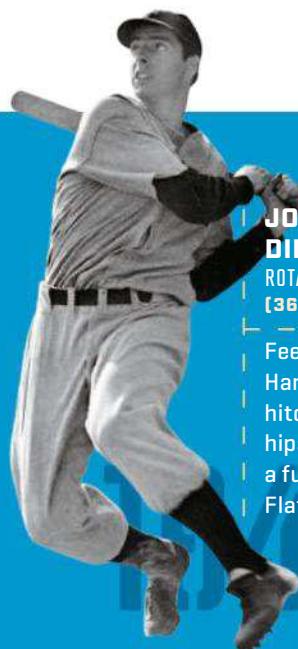
"Who taught you that swing?" Martinez demanded from Castro, who gave him a name: Craig Wallenbrock.

One day after the season ended Martinez was in Santa Clarita, Calif., working with Wallenbrock and his assistant, Robert Van Scococ, spending five hours a day in the cage.



MEL OTT
THE LEG KICK
[36", 37 OZ.]

One of the kick's first practitioners and an extremist—he stepped high and far. Using a windup style, he also had an enormous hitch, with hands dropping to mid-thigh.



JOE DIMAGGIO
ROTATIONAL HITTING
[36", 35 OZ.]

Feet wide apart. Hands preset; no hitch. Great speed in hips and core during a full, fast turn. Flat bat path.



TED WILLIAMS
UPWARD PATH
[35", 33 OZ.]

Hands started low and hitched. Swing on a slight upward path to equal the downward path of the pitch. Hips fired before hands.

1930S 1950S

Meanwhile, two trends were rendering the in-and-out approach even less effective. First, velocity ramped up. From 2002 to '14 the average fastball jumped from 89.0 to 91.8 mph. Because a pitch travels an average of 54 feet, four inches from the release point to the plate, an increase of 2.8 mph meant the ball arrived .0127 seconds sooner—a huge reduction in the hitter's margin of error. Second, defensive shifts became mainstream. Players who had been taught to drive the ball up the middle saw repositioned infielders turn their grounders into outs.

In the summer of 2013, the down-to-the-ball swing wasn't working for Martinez, then 26 and a mediocre .253 career hitter and .390 slugger. As he floundered, he

Martinez wanted to know everything, and there was much to learn. Wallenbrock, a self-described "mediocre college baseball player," dropped out of San Diego State in the 1960s because . . . well, it was the '60s, and good times and the ocean beckoned. He returned to baseball some years later when his brother, 11 years younger, wanted help with his hitting. Wallenbrock simply began dissecting big league swings as much as he could. "There was nothing spectacular," he said. "Just learning the hard way."

Soon he began counseling others, and by the mid-1980s he had gained a reputation and a part-time scouting gig with the A's. The business grew. Around 2000 he started working with a kid from Granada Hills High: Braun, who

would set the school home run record as a senior with 25.

Wallenbrock says he admires Li because "his paintings didn't have anything central or big to catch your eye. There was a lot of detail. You had to look at all the subtle nuances." He felt the same way about hitting. It wasn't about just one or two keys but all the links in a long kinetic chain—"an infinite number of fractions that need meticulous examination."

Four meticulous months later Martinez was a changed hitter, though the Astros didn't wait to see it; they released him in spring training. Since then his slugging percentage of .574 is second only to Mike Trout's .579. Last season, despite missing a month with a sprained right foot, Martinez belted 45 home runs, the most ever without 500 plate appearances, after which he signed a five-year, \$110 million contract with Boston.

T

HE SUMMER of Martinez's epiphany, two third basemen began implementing similar—and ultimately wildly enriching—swing changes. Donaldson, a career .232 hitter with Oakland, began tearing up the AL after a winter under Bobby Tewksbary, who had played briefly (72 games) and poorly (.229) in the Can-Am independent league. In 2008, Tewksbary took a job as general manager of a physiotherapy clinic in his native New Hampshire, but his love of baseball and the gnawing mystery of why he failed as a hitter never left him.

Studying clips of the greats in 2009, he found one that changed his life: a side view of Albert Pujols in slo-mo. Tewksbary played it over and over, and solved the mystery.

"For my entire career, what I had been taught and what a majority of hitters had been taught, was that the back

PETE ROSE

FLAT SWING
[35", 33 OZ.]

Bat held flat and stayed level through the zone. Economy of movement, including little to none by the head. Prioritized contact over power.

GEORGE BRETT

WEIGHT SHIFT
[34", 31 OZ.]

Transfer of weight from a firm back side to a firm front side. Emphasis was on full extension, promoting a one-hand, high finish.

TONY GWYNN

LINEAR HITTING
[32", 31 OZ.]

The principles: *Take the knob to the ball. Stay inside the ball. Let the ball get deep. Hands "pushed" the ball to the opposite field with a level stroke.*

Another Wallenbrock pupil, outfielder Raúl Ibañez, joined the Dodgers as a special assistant in 2016 and persuaded them to hire Wallenbrock as a consultant. After that season, while Los Angeles was in the playoffs, the club sent utility player Chris Taylor to work with Wallenbrock and Van Scocoy in Glendale, Ariz. A career .234 hitter with one home run, Taylor rebuilt his swing, adding a pronounced trigger mechanism with his hands. Last year Taylor, 27, hit 21 home runs and slugged .496. This offseason, Bradley Zimmer of the Indians, Brandon Drury of the Yankees, and Juan Lagares and Tim Tebow of the Mets were among the many players to seek the Oracle of Santa Clarita and join the revolution.

foot, back knee and hands all fire together," Tewksbary says. "They move toward the pitch at the same time. When [Pujols's] back knee went forward and his hands went up and back, it was a wow moment. The best hitter on the planet was doing what I thought was wrong. I had to shut down everything I knew about hitting and look at it as objectively as possible."

That winter Tewksbary began to work with Chris Colabello, a former Can-Am teammate. By 2011, Colabello was the Independent League Player of the Year; two years later, he was on the Twins. Others, including Donaldson, noticed, especially as Tewksbary spread his gospel on his website. With his overhauled swing,

Donaldson finished in the top eight in MVP voting for four straight years starting in 2013—and won it in '15 as a Blue Jay, earning a two-year, \$28.7 million deal.

Also in 2013, Turner, a career .260 utilityman with little power, became intrigued with the new swing of Marlon Byrd, his Mets teammate. Byrd told him he had learned it from Doug Latta, a former high school coach who never played pro ball and who operated two batting cages at an industrial park in Northridge, Calif.

By September, with no home runs on the season, Turner says he decided, “‘Screw it. I’m going to start hitting the way Marlon told me.’ I go into Cleveland and I hit a home run off [Cody] Allen. Two days later, off [Danny] Salazar, I hit another homer. We go back home, and I hit some ropes off the wall in centerfield. I was feeling really good.”

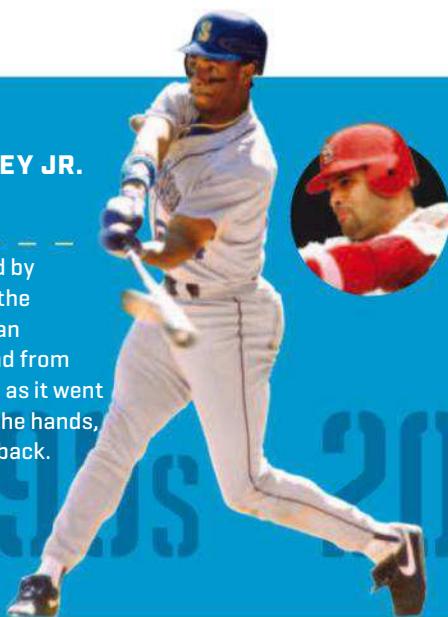
N 2015, MLB rolled out Statcast, a torrent of data derived from tracking the movement of every ball and every player. Launch angle was the system’s breakout hit. Statistical analysts had known for two decades that balls hit in the air generate more production than balls hit on the ground, but launch angle made the data mainstream and fun. The replays, embellished by comet trails on flying baseballs, whooshing sound effects and a stream of esoteric statistics, spoke the language of a generation raised on video games. (It was in the second half of that season, when the homer rate jumped suddenly, that speculation began about a livelier baseball. MLB expects to release soon the results of research it conducted this winter on the ball’s properties.)

More important, the data expedited the acceptance of the modern swing. The average launch angle has

KEN GRIFFEY JR.

STORED ENERGY
[34", 31 OZ.]

Power created by “separation”: the stretching of an imaginary band from the front foot, as it went forward, and the hands, which stayed back.



ALBERT PUJOLS

LINEAR + ROTATIONAL
[34.5", 33 OZ.]

Hands first worked up and back as front hip started forward. “Get the foot down on time,” then let rotational forces [hips, torso, hands] take over.



JOSH DONALDSON

THE MODERN SWING
[34.5", 32.5 OZ.]

Get ready early. Leg kick and hand movement to push the barrel back. Get bat into the plane of the pitch, creating backspin and loft.

—T.V.

Turner hit .357 and slugged .571 in September. Never in his life had he raked like this. He spent the winter training with Byrd under Latta’s direction in Northridge. As Houston did with Martinez, the Mets didn’t wait for Turner’s swing to take root. They released him. Since then, he has hit .303 for L.A. and slugged .502, the best in franchise history by any third baseman with 500 games. In 2016 he re-signed for \$64 million over four years.

“Before launch angle was a big deal, it was constant talk with Doug about getting the ball in the air,” Turner says. “I don’t think about east and west anymore. I think about north and south. I don’t care where it goes, as long as it goes up.”

increased every year since Statcast debuted: from 10.1 degrees to 10.8 to 11.0. It took a hundred years for baseball decision-makers to replace batting average with on-base percentage as the coin of the realm; it took less than a decade for them to replace OBP with slugging percentage. The object is to score runs, so it’s not just getting on base but *where* you get on base—i.e., closer to home via doubles, triples and, especially, dingers.

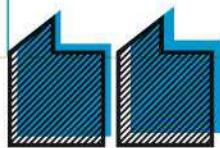
As defensive shifts proliferated, many speculated they would trigger an emphasis on opposite-field hitting. Instead the reverse has happened: To beat the shift, hitters have concentrated more on pulling the ball over it. Why? Opposite-field hitting yields singles (batting average).

Fly balls to the pull side yield extra-base hits (slugging).

Last year players struck 41 balls at a 13-degree launch angle with at least 90 mph exit velocity. Every one of them was a hit—a 1.000 batting average. Sounds ideal, right? But those 41 hits comprised 37 singles, four doubles and no home runs. Double the launch angle to 26 degrees at 90-plus mph and you get the sweet spot for home runs: 469, the most at any angle.

The Cubs, the Brewers and the Giants were among teams last season that strung yellow ropes from home plate to the top of the cage to delineate the preferred launch angle range. San Francisco, for instance, set the low rope at 5 degrees and the high rope at 25. Last year players slugged .979 when they launched balls between those two marks, and .367 when they didn't.

Most players, however, focus on the process of getting the ball airborne, not specific launch angles, which mostly are determined by the height and track of the pitch. "They're fun to look at," Gallo says, "but I don't measure my swings off them."



I DON'T THINK ABOUT EAST AND WEST ANYMORE.
I THINK ABOUT **NORTH AND SOUTH**. I DON'T CARE
WHERE IT GOES, AS LONG AS IT GOES UP." —**Justin Turner**

THE CONVERTS keep coming. What Gallo was to the fly ball last season, first baseman Eric Hosmer was to the ground ball. No corner player hit more grounders than Hosmer, a trait that caused sabermetricians to question the Padres' wisdom in handing him an eight-year, \$144 million contract. Last year major leaguers batted .410 on balls in the air and .245 on balls on the ground.

But Hosmer began to get religion when it came to the modern swing after hitting .225 last April for the Royals with an average 2.1-degree launch angle. "I started breaking down hitters and what they do and changed my whole approach," he recalls. "I had been swinging down and trying to drive through the baseball with backspin. So instead of the lead elbow going down, you kind of lock the lead elbow and work up and through the ball."

From May on he raised his launch angle to a still-paltry 3.9 degrees; with the added loft he batted .335 and slugged a career-high .533. Changing a swing is hard work. "A huge deal," says Indians first baseman

Yonder Alonso, who before last season, in addition to physical training, worked four to five hours in the cage every day. "I basically didn't see my family." After never having hit more than nine home runs in a season, he smoked 28 at age 30.

Over the same winter Marisnick, an Astros outfielder and a .225 hitter with little power, sought out Eugene Bleecker, a hitting instructor in Riverside, Calif. Though Bleecker, 33, never played beyond Division II, Marisnick put his career in his hands upon the recommendation of Dodgers catcher Austin Barnes, a Bleecker protégé who had a breakout season in 2017. Barnes and Marisnick had been teammates at Riverside Poly High. Bleecker wouldn't let Marisnick pick up a bat for a month. Instead, they used a PVC pipe to build new muscle memory.

"I was asking him to hit the ball in the air more, and he physically could not do it," Bleecker says. "We were repatterning his movements. You have to look at motor learning and complex and dynamic systems. That's what hitting is. You can't teach mechanics." With his



SWING SHIFT

Martinez parlayed his remade stroke and new-found pop into a megadeal with Boston.



beginning with the hands back and loaded, they work up and back, creating rhythm and barrel movement as the pitcher delivers. A leg kick is often added as a mechanism to help get started.

• *Get in lag position early and slowly* The back elbow drops independently, leaving the hands back and about shoulder height. As the elbow reaches toward the back hip, the barrel tilts behind the batter, toward the umpire's shoulder, so it can get on plane with the pitch earlier.

• *Get on plane as soon as possible* The pitch travels on a decline of 6 to 12 degrees, so it's important that the barrel get on that path far back in the zone. (Also: *Hit through a path, not to a spot*.)

• *Hit the fastball deep in the zone* The old method was to hit it out front. But that commitment left a batter vulnerable to off-speed pitches—the barrel was gone before the off-speed pitch got there. By committing to hitting fastballs deep—an opposite-field gap orientation, which is how Trout thinks—a hitter who keeps his barrel on plane with the pitch can adjust to off-speed pitches. This is the margin of error hitters talk about; the barrel is on plane longer. It describes how Tigers slugger Miguel Cabrera hits: fastballs the other way, off-speed pitches pulled.

• *Hit the bottom third of the ball on a slight upswing* "When you're coming up and through the ball it gives your barrel that much more of the ball to work through," Hosmer explains. To generate lift, Kris Bryant says, instead of "taking the knob to the ball"—the old method—he thinks about "taking the knob to the hitter's eye [the dark background above the centerfield wall]. Get your hands up high."

remade stroke Marisnick hit a career-high 16 homers in little more than half a season while slugging .496.

Lofting the ball is a simple concept but requires an intricate and carefully timed kinetic chain. These are some of the key links to the modern swing:

- *Get ready early* Rather than beginning with the hands back and loaded, they work up and back, creating rhythm and barrel movement as the pitcher delivers. A leg kick is often added as a mechanism to help get started.
- *Get in lag position early and slowly* The back elbow drops independently, leaving the hands back and about shoulder height. As the elbow reaches toward the back hip, the barrel tilts behind the batter, toward the umpire's shoulder, so it can get on plane with the pitch earlier.
- *Get on plane as soon as possible* The pitch travels on a decline of 6 to 12 degrees, so it's important that the barrel get on that path far back in the zone. (Also: *Hit through a path, not to a spot*.)
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A

MINOR LEAGUE player, whom Dodgers president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman prefers to leave nameless, walked into camp last year with a new swing. He drastically dipped his back shoulder and took a vicious uppercut, producing mostly would-be pop-ups to the top of the cage.

"What are you doing?" a coach asked.

"Hitting the ball in the air."

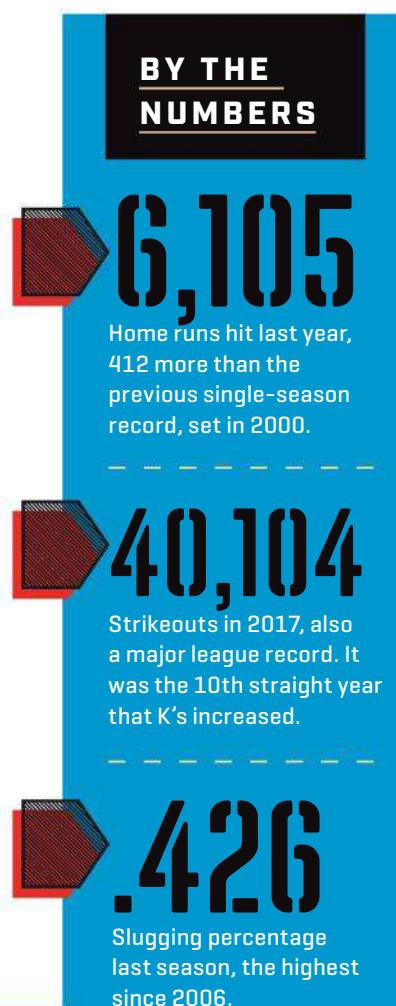
This is the disclaimer portion of this story. The chase for the modern swing holds the same downside as pitchers' pursuit of velocity, which can damage young arms and set back careers. You can find poor imitations of Donaldson's swing everywhere in amateur baseball.

"We watch these videos and see a lot of kids are dipping their shoulder trying to hit the ball straight in the air," Gallo says. "For us, that's not the way you do it. We send each other videos like, 'Man, they're going to ruin this generation, because [these kids] are not going to hit 95 [mph] with movement.' You kind of feel bad for them."

Pitchers already are adjusting to the modern swing by throwing more high fastballs, which are difficult to get on plane and launch. Last year hitters batted .321 on four-seam fastballs over the width of the plate, belt high and below. They hit .240 when pitchers elevated those fastballs to the top third of the zone or above.

The modern swing is not for everyone. Nobody wants a speedster like Billy Hamilton to hit the ball in the air. And some players simply don't have the fast-twitch movements to execute the kinetic chain. According to a major league source, Toronto was concerned that Donaldson's enthusiasm for the swing may have caused teammates to adopt it. In 2016 shortstop Troy Tulowitzki raised his launch angle to 14° and hit fly balls at a career-high rate—while finishing with the worst on-base percentage in any of his nine qualified seasons. Last year, in limited time, he lowered his launch angle to 9.5 degrees and hit a career-high rate of grounders. "Donaldson is hypermobile," says Bleeker. "He thinks about his stretch like he's unwinding a tornado. Not everybody can do it like that."

The revolution also has scrubbed much nuance out of the game. One out of every 2.98 plate appearances last year ended in a home run, strike-



out or walk—none of which require defense—the highest such rate ever. Stolen base attempts were at their lowest rate in half a century. Sacrifice bunts dropped to an all-time low for the third season in a row. Strikeouts were at a record high for the 10th straight year. Singles reached an all-time low (63.7% of hits).

"It's such a power game now," Tewksbary says. "In some ways it's bittersweet. I enjoy the mental game and home runs. It's exciting but at the same time it's boring. When you scale it down to the high school level and see pop-ups that don't go out because these kids are chasing home runs, it does take away from the game."

HERE'S ANOTHER sign of the revolution: Major league organizations are putting people in uniform who never played affiliated baseball. The Diamondbacks hired Van Scoyoc, 30, whose playing days topped out at a California community college, and gave him the newly minted title of hitting strategist. He's an adjunct to Dave Magadan, who played

16 years in the majors and has been a hitting coach for 15.

"Almost like a hitter, as a coach you can't think, I'm good. I can't get any better," Magadan says. "You have to be open and not have so much ego. As a player I was the opposite of what guys are taught today. It was all 'direct to the ball.' If I had known how to get the ball in the air to the pull side . . . it makes you nostalgic for what could have been."

Houston brought in Jeff Albert, 37, as an assistant hitting coach. After playing 11 games of independent ball, he got a master's degree in exercise science at Louisiana Tech, ran a website dedicated to baseball training and analysis, and coached nine years in the minors. The Mariners brought in minor league hitting coordinator Hugh Quattlebaum, 39, an Amherst graduate and four-year minor leaguer who was running an online training site, giving private lessons and coaching travel ball.

"Technology and data are the great equalizers," Seattle GM Jerry DiPoto says. "Can you imagine the day when an exercise physiologist and a biomechanics specialist

OUT TO LAUNCH

FOR HITTERS SEEKING POWER, A SWING THAT SUPPLIES MORE LOFT IS THE THING

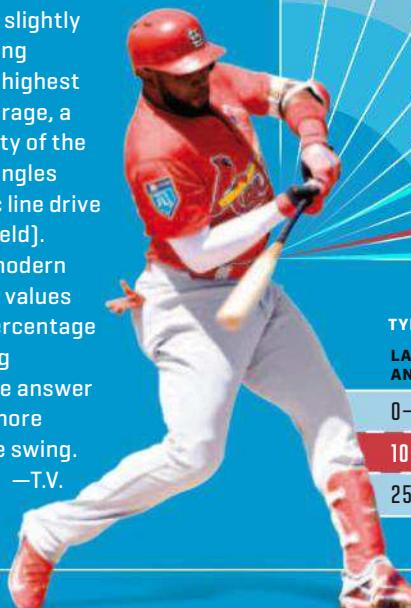
WHAT'S THE ideal launch angle for a hitter? To arrive at the answer, let's take away the variables associated with pitch location and type and consider only all fastballs thrown down the middle last season.

A flat bat path was the least effective because it produced more ground balls, which overwhelmingly

are outs. While a traditional, slightly upward swing yielded the highest batting average, a vast majority of the hits were singles [the classic line drive to the outfield].

For the modern player, who values slugging percentage over batting average, the answer is to build more loft into the swing.

—T.V.



* Players who put the most balls in play in that launch angle window. (Turner tied with three others.)

TYPICAL HITTER*

LAUNCH ANGLE	BALLS IN PLAY	BA	SLG	HR	BATTER
0-2°	668	.506	.536	0	MELKY CABRERA
10-12°	735	.831	1.013	0	MARCELL OZUNA
25-27°	359	.553	1.792	128	JUSTIN TURNER



walk into the manager's office and say, 'These three guys can't play today because their energy is low' and the manager says, 'O.K.'? That day already is here."

Hank Haney, Butch Harmon and David Leadbetter, three of the most renowned golf swing coaches, won one combined PGA event. Baseball is embracing the same type of swing coach—teachers from outside the ropes who, with an Internet connection, have studied hitting movements in the finest details. The Mariners hired a quality assurance coach, Dustin Lind, 29, who played club baseball at Idaho State, became a physical therapist and has so thoroughly studied hitting that he filled a 15-gigabyte Google drive with thousands of videos, articles and documents and posted it on Twitter. A clip of Donaldson on MLB Network explaining his swing has been viewed more than 750,000 times.

"Video is a game changer," Tewksbary says. "Twitter lights up every time there's a home run and a slow-motion replay of the swing. It didn't happen this quickly in the past. It's all about information. I worked really hard to make my swing work, with access to video and all these metrics. The direction it's really going is how to optimize the performance from the mental side. The physical side is not a secret any more. Take a good swing, hit the ball in the air, and you have a chance to perform well."

AS RICHARDS pulled the ball out of his glove and behind his back, Gallo began to move his hands. Gallo, like Bryant, waits with the bat held parallel to the ground, so that as the pitcher begins his delivery he already is creating rhythm and movement by having to raise the barrel. As this happens, Gallo also starts his leg kick. Getting ready early, with movement, has been a key for Gallo since rookie ball, in 2012, when he began working with Justin Mashore, now the Rangers' assistant hitting coach.

Gallo took his stride, lifted his back elbow and then dropped it into its "slot" behind his left hip as his hands loaded. It is the same trigger to a swing change that Dodgers first baseman Cody Bellinger learned in 2015, when after hitting four home runs in two years he suddenly crushed 30 in Class A. Last season Bellinger set an NL-rookie record with 39 homers. One of Bellinger's swing tutors in '15 was Damon Mashore, Justin's brother.



SAGE OF THE CAGE

Those who doubted Mike Bryant need only look at his son, the 2016 NL MVP.



"The hitch is a big key for me," says Bellinger, using a word that traditionally was viewed as a negative, even though many great hitters, including Ruth, Williams, Hank Aaron, Willie Mays and Barry Bonds created this early movement with their hands.

Richards's heater is typically 96 mph and tops out at 99. Gallo dropped his barrel into the plane of the pitch in time to hit Richards's best fastball deep in the zone. Instead, Richards spun a 89.5 mph slider. Had Gallo "cheated" to hit Richards's best fastball out front, his barrel would have passed through the zone before the slower pitch arrived. But because he got ready early and intended to hit the fastball deep, Gallo's barrel re-

mained in the path of the pitch.

"Right off you can see, 'Oh, my God, that's backspun to center,'" Gallo recalls. "It feels amazing because you don't even feel it off the bat. It's the greatest feeling in the world. You know you hit it, but you don't feel it."

The ball sizzled off his bat at 116.2 mph with a launch angle of 26 degrees, the sweet spot for homers, landing at the top of the hill in centerfield at Angel Stadium. It bounced three times on the green turf before rolling down, like the ball in a giant pachinko game. By the time it hit one of the boulders on the bottom of the hill, Gallo had touched third base. *Just put it in play?* There were 44,424 balls hit last season on two-strike counts. This went the farthest of them all: 490 feet.

Bleeker likes to frame his students' quest as a math problem. A hitter who gets 600 plate appearances in a year will see about 2,300 pitches and swing about 1,100 times. Twenty doubles and 20 home runs make for a solid season. One hundred players did so in 2017—the most ever.

But only 17 players reached 30 doubles and 30 home runs. "With just 60 good swings out of a thousand," he says, "you're worth \$100 million. So the question is, 'How can I get 10 better swings out of a thousand next year? Fifteen better swings?'"

The answer is undeniable. It is in the data. It is in the video. It is in the air. And it is in Mike Bryant's indoor batting cage, where Kris still hits every winter and his dad gives private lessons. Every once in a while, when Kris is done, he will linger long enough outside the room to know the revolution is here to stay.

"I see all these eight-year-olds hitting the ball up into the top of the net," Kris says. "It's beautiful." □



RISING SONS

IF THE NAMES—AND GAMES—OF THESE PROMISING PROSPECTS SEEM STRIKINGLY FAMILIAR, IT'S FOR GOOD REASON. THE OFFSPRING OF SOME SEASONED PROS ARE ABOUT TO MAKE THEIR OWN MARKS IN THE MAJOR LEAGUES

BY JON TAYLER

Photograph by JEFFERY A. SALTER



VLADIMIR GUERRERO JR.

Blue Jays/3B



VLADIMIR GUERRERO

Four teams,
1996–2011, OF/DH
Hall of Fame 2017

The toughest adjustment young Vlad had to make last year wasn't handling older, more experienced pitchers; it was the weather. The native of the Dominican Republic had to get acclimated to playing in the early-spring cold of Lansing, Mich., for Toronto's low A team. Any chill was not apparent in his blazing bat, though, as the 18-year-old slashed .316/.409/.480 in 71 games at Lansing. He continued raking at high A Dunedin in Florida, batting .333, and finished the season with more walks than strikeouts at each level. If, as expected, he gets the nod to move up to the Jays' Double A team in Manchester, N.H., he'll have to tackle frigid temperatures once more. Of course, it won't be long before the top five prospect is suiting up in another chilly clime, north of the border.

GEORGE GOJKOVIĆ/GETTY IMAGES (VLAD SR.)

FERNANDO TATIS JR.

Padres/Infielder



FERNANDO TATIS

Five teams,
1997-2010, 3B
Hit .265 with 50 steals

One of the best prospects in baseball was obtained two years ago in a trade with the White Sox for the low, low price of journeyman pitcher James Shields. The deal might be the best of A.J. Preller's four-year stint as GM of the Padres. The infielder, 19, shares not only a name with his father, but also the potential to kindle as much excitement as Fernando Tatis Sr. did when he hit two grand slams in the third inning for the Cardinals in a game against the Dodgers in 1999. Tatis Jr. jumped to Double A last season after hitting .281/.390/.520 in A ball, and he hit 22 home runs—including one grand slam.





RISING SONS

NICK GORDON

Twins/Shortstop



TOM GORDON

Eight teams,
1988-2009, RHP
AL saves leader [46] in
1998 with the Red Sox

Just like his older half brother Dee, who started as a shortstop with the Dodgers [and is now a centerfielder with the Mariners], Nick is an infielder by trade. The No. 5 pick in the 2014 draft out of Olympia High in Orlando, the 22-year-old is climbing his way through the Twins' system, hitting .270/.341/.408 at Double A Chattanooga last season, enough to earn an invite to the Futures Game. The majors are within reach, but if Nick can't make it as a shortstop, he could always follow his dad as a pitcher; as a junior in high school, Nick had an 0.78 ERA with 44 strikeouts in $35\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

ROBERT BECK (FERNANDO JR.); RONALD C. MORA (FERNANDO SR.); JEFFERY A. SALTER (NICK); MARK J. TERRILL/AP (TOM)





RISING SONS

BO BICHETTE

Blue Jays/Shortstop



DANTE BICHETTE

Five teams,
1988-2001, OF
Four-time All-Star

Had it been up to Dante Bichette Sr., his youngest son wouldn't have followed in his footsteps. "He wanted me to play tennis," Bo says. "I kind of forced myself into baseball." That looks like a good call: The 20-year-old shortstop hit .362/.423/.565 across two levels of A ball last year, winning the Midwest League batting title (.384) and earning the No. 8 spot on *Baseball America's* Top 100 prospects list. Of course, he might have a pretty mean backhand, too.



JEFFERY A. SALTER (BO); PETER READ MILLER (DANTE); ROBERT BECK (CAL); GREG FUMA/GETTY IMAGES (PAUL)





CAL QUANTRILL

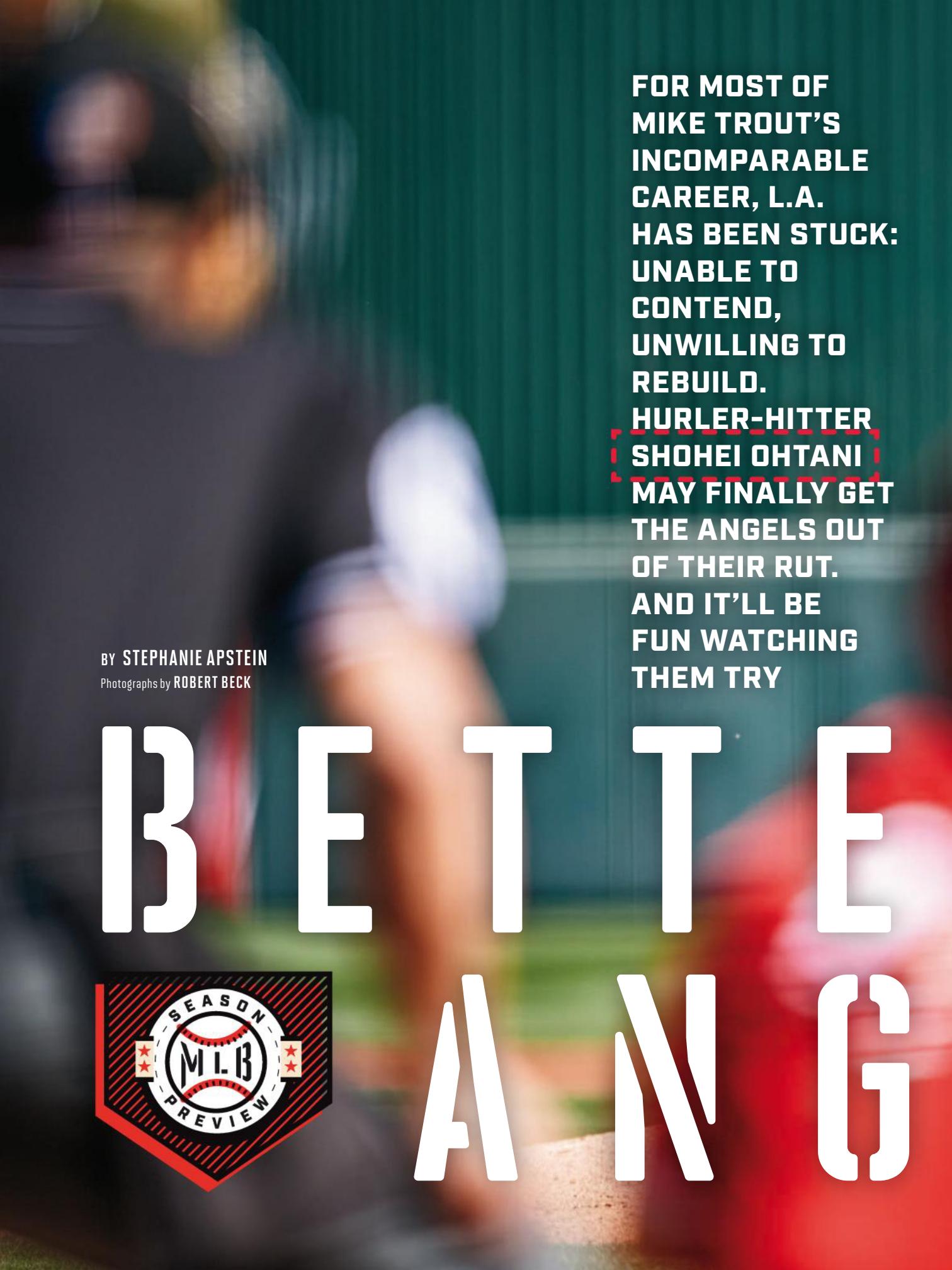
Padres/Pitcher



PAUL QUANTRILL

Seven teams,
1992–2005, RHP
Holds Yankees record
for appearances
(86), set in 2004

If there is one thing Cal hopes to inherit from his father, it is durability. Paul Quantrill was a mainstay in bullpens across the majors for nearly 15 years, appearing in 80 or more games in four straight seasons, from 2001 to '04. Cal, the eighth pick of the '16 draft out of Stanford, will try to match that reliability as a starter; he started a total of 22 games last season in stints at high A Lake Elsinore and Double A San Antonio. His appearance in a Padres uniform this spring may not be the last time in 2018.



FOR MOST OF
MIKE TROUT'S
INCOMPARABLE
CAREER, L.A.
HAS BEEN STUCK:
UNABLE TO
CONTEND,
UNWILLING TO
REBUILD.
HURLER-HITTER
SHOHEI OHTANI
MAY FINALLY GET
THE ANGELS OUT
OF THEIR RUT.
AND IT'LL BE
FUN WATCHING
THEM TRY

BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN
Photographs by ROBERT BECK

BETTER ANG





REELS?

SHO OF FORCE

If Ohtani can flash the power he displayed in Japan—at bat and on the mound—then Trout (with Scioscia) could get just his second shot at the playoffs.



THE DOWNSIDE of having the best player in the game is that your franchise's failures are magnified. The Angels have doggedly—and, mostly, futilely—pursued the playoffs over the past six years, knowing full well that every World Series-less season squanders another chunk of Mike Trout's prime, that every meaningless game he plays in September is a tiny baseball tragedy. Los Angeles has handed nine-figure deals to risky free agents, unloaded top prospects for immediate help and taken fliers on marginal talents. Nothing has worked. The Angels have never finished in last place with Trout, never even lost 90 games. But a first-round sweep by the Royals in the 2014 ALDS represents the entirety of his postseason career.

THAT KIND of mediocrity doesn't do much for a team's buzz—and frankly neither does Trout's metronomic greatness (six full seasons, six top four MVP finishes), which is too easily taken for granted. But in December the Angels stumbled into their best hope yet for generating attention—and, perhaps, postseason contention. With no apparent advantages over many of the other 28 teams vying for the most intriguing free agent of the offseason, L.A. landed both an ace and a home run hitter in the same player. Over his five seasons with the Nippon Ham Fighters, Shohei Ohtani displayed a dual dominance that no one in MLB has achieved (and few have tried) since Babe Ruth. Ohtani played only 65 games last season due to a right-ankle injury, but as a 21-year-old in 2016 he had a 1.86 ERA in 20 starts and was third in Nippon Pro Baseball in strikeouts. That alone might have been enough to attract the attention of major league front offices. But Ohtani also batted .322 with 22 home runs in 382 plate appearances that season; if he had qualified he would have led the league in slugging and OPS.

Now 23, Ohtani could have signed anywhere in the majors; under MLB rules governing international free agents, there was little variance in the financial terms of the offers he received. (More on that later.) He has yet

click.” “Shohei Ohtani is Going to Be a Los Angeles Angel for Some Reason” read a *GQ* headline after he signed. Even Angels GM Billy Eppler, after taking the congratulatory phone call from Ohtani’s agent, was so shocked that he completely missed his chair as he went to sit down.

Dozens of reporters from Japan have chronicled Ohtani’s every move since his arrival in Tempe, Ariz., last month. To accommodate his daily media sessions the team erected a tent in the parking lot beyond rightfield at Diablo Stadium. Unfortunately for those attending, Ohtani’s “click” quote is typical; he tends to be inscrutable. “There were good and bad parts,” he replied to a question about the highlights of his first bullpen session of the spring. “And the good parts were the positive part of today.”

Lacking much color from their subject, the journalists scatter daily throughout the clubhouse, asking the other Angels for detailed reports on what Ohtani ate for breakfast. His teammates try to remain patient through the bilingual interviews—“I’m gonna be famous in Japan!” starter Andrew Heaney shouted excitedly after one—and joke about the respite afforded Trout by the shiny new toy.

In fact they are nearly as intrigued as the hordes of reporters and the myriad fans clad in number 17 shirts. Ohtani’s new teammates spend his plate appearances





and innings on the mound glued to the dugout rail. To a team that already had the greatest player, Eppler added the greatest curiosity. In just one winter, Los Angeles refashioned itself as the most interesting team in baseball.

F YOU measure wealth by wins, baseball's

middle class is disappearing. This season a dozen teams appear to be shooting for 100 victories. Another dozen or so might

be shooting for 100 losses. ("You could argue there is more competition to get the No. 1 pick in the draft than to win the World Series," Mariners GM Jerry Dipoto said in January.) When a club finishes close to .500 and lacks a bumper crop of prospects—hello, 2017 Angels (80–82)—it can be easier and cheaper to tear down and start over than to attempt to supplement an inadequate core. Teams no longer think it's worthwhile to aim for 85 wins, hope to get hot enough to grab the second wild card and take a shot to advance in a coin-flip game. The success of the Cubs (top four draft picks in consecutive seasons, then a World Series two years later) and the Astros (three straight 100-loss campaigns, then last season's title) have convinced front offices (and fans) that tanking and rebuilding works.

And yet there the Angels have been, year after year, finishing in third or fourth in the AL West, then pouring money into their roster. It was far more fun to propose Trout trades that would signal a teardown: Would the Cubs' Kyle Schwarber, Javier Báez and Jorge Soler have been enough? What about the Red Sox' Mookie Betts, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Xander Bogaerts? Or the Yankees' Starlin Castro, Brett Gardner and Clint Frazier?

The real-life conversations were less fruitful. "Our chance was to draft [Trout] and we blew it," A's GM David Forst says. "Why would they ever in any situation accept [a trade]? We never even made the call." Says Giants GM Bobby Evans, "I'm afraid Billy Eppler would take me off his speed dial if I asked."

Eppler, who took over as GM in 2015, has never considered pulling the trigger on a deal. "I have a long drive home—40 minutes," he says referring to his prime time for reflection. "Forty minutes. Not once."

Instead the Angels go for it, again and again. Last August they traded for leftfielder Justin Upton, who, rather than opt out and hit the stagnant free-agent market this offseason, signed on for another year at \$17.5 million. That move paid off twice: Upton spent the fall telling Ian Kinsler, his old Tigers locker neighbor, how much fun he was having in Anaheim. While Detroit, in the early stages of its own teardown, had several offers this offseason for the 35-year-old second baseman with one year and \$11 million left on his contract, Kinsler only waived his no-trade clause to join the Angels.

Zack Cozart could have played shortstop, his natural

position, for any of a handful of rebuilders, but he chose to play third for L.A. After seven years with the Reds—two good, five dismal—Cozart, 32, wanted deeply to join a contender. “It’s hard when you’re not a young player,” he says. “A young player’s just excited to be in the big leagues, but I’ve been to the playoffs and it’s like, Man, these seasons are really long, and they’re *really* long when you’re not good.”

Before signing in December for three years and \$38 million, Cozart told Eppler that he did not want to end up with a team that would sell off its assets at the first sign of weakness. Don't worry, Eppler assured him. "Arte's not going to let us try not to win."

That would be owner Arte Moreno, 71, an outdoor advertising magnate who bought the team in 2003. Moreno grew up rooting for the 1950s Yankees—a decade in which they played in eight World Series—and he disapproves on almost a moral level of stripping a team down to rebuild. Agreement on that point would be a condition of the job for his GMs. “I wouldn’t even put him on the list,” he says of a proponent for tanking. “I wouldn’t do it to fans. Lose 100 games a year and then say, ‘We’re gonna fix it?’”

Sometimes this attitude leads to deals like the five years and \$125 million Moreno gave Josh Hamilton before the 2013 season. Hamilton was 31 and had a history of drug abuse; he played 240 games for L.A. before the team ate his salary and traded him to the Rangers. The signing came a year after the Angels sank \$240 million over 10 years into a 32-year-old Albert Pujols. Hampered by foot injuries, he was the worst player last year by WAR (-1.8). A year before that, they took on the \$86 million owed over four years to 32-year-old Vernon Wells. He hit .222 over two seasons before being traded to the Yankees.

But that approach can also produce an offseason like this one. On a back field in Tempe, Moreno watches as his 26-year-old two-time MVP takes batting practice. “What are you gonna do?” he scoffs. “Tell Trout you’re getting rid of everybody?”

THE SUBTEXT of every conversation about L.A. involves the Trout Window, which is scheduled to close at 9 a.m. ET the day after the conclusion of the 2020 World Series, when—barring an extension—he will become a free agent. If the Angels are going to take advantage of Trout's unprecedented talents, they may not have much time left.

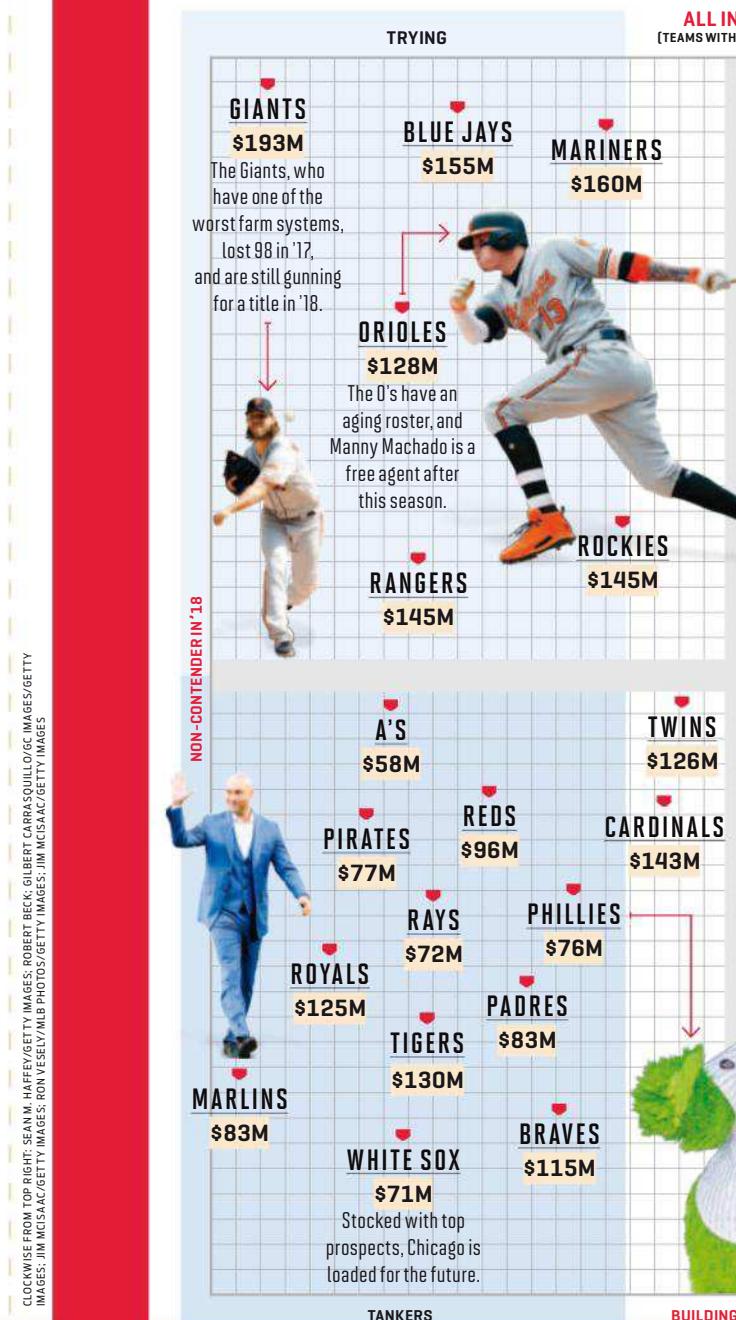
Eppler and manager Mike Scioscia insist that they do not hear the clock ticking on their centerfielder. Trout himself laughs and says, "I don't think there's a Trout Window." But Moreno demurs: "There's a little bit of a window." He's already discussing what it would take to make Trout an Angel for life. "If you're coming to a ballgame," Moreno says, "you want to see the stars play."

The serendipity of this offseason is that Moreno landed

THE PO

SEPARATING THE STRI

If you'd gone to sleep after the last out of Game 7 of the World Series and just woken up now, you'd find there had been no change among the MLB teams at the top. If anything, that grouping has gotten more entrenched after a winter in which nearly a dozen clubs punted on



WER GAP

VERS FROM THE TANKERS

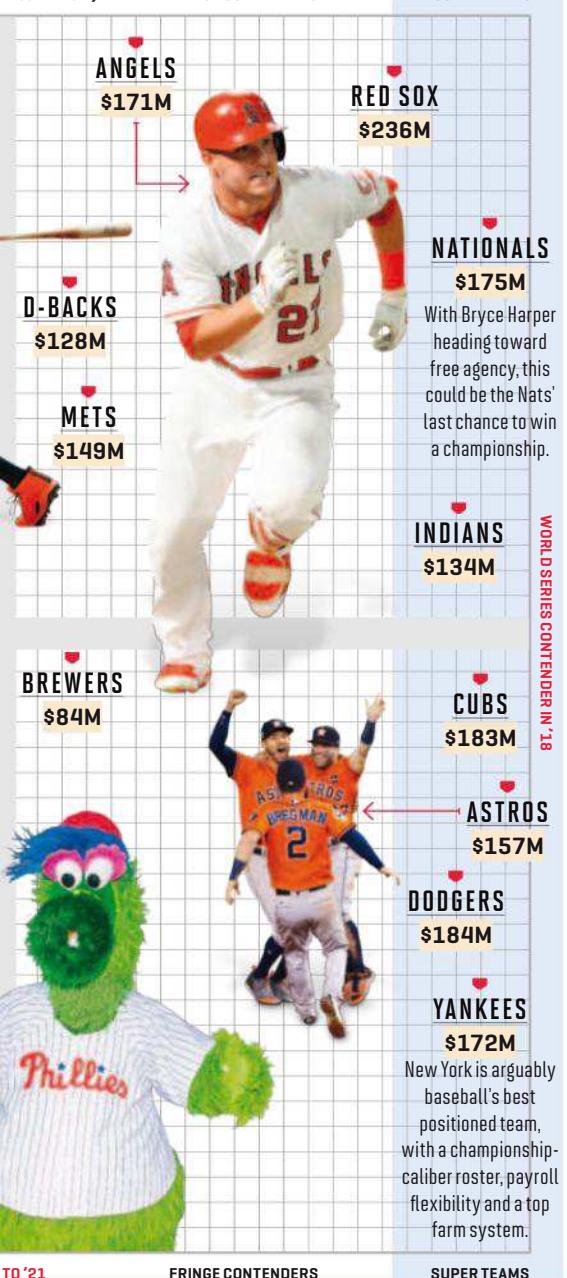
even trying to compete for a title in 2018. And so baseball enters its new season with its deepest divide between the rich and the rebuilding, the title favorites and the tankers, and teams that aren't in one camp or the other—such as the Angels—have become rare. ***—Jon Taylor***

—Jon Taylor

ON '18
PROJ. PAYROLL

FRINGE CONTENDERS

SUPER TEAMS



the Japanese Babe Ruth without having to break the bank. On the open market Ohtani might be worth \$200 million, but under MLB rules that govern international free agents he would have had to wait until he turned 25 to be the subject of an unlimited free-agent bidding war. Instead, every team except the Marlins offered the same \$20 million posting fee to the Fighters—Ohtani gets none of that—while agreeing to pay him the major league minimum of \$545,000 this season. Ohtani, who got a \$2.3 million signing bonus from L.A., remains under its control for the next six years.

The plan as it stands now is for him to pitch every six days and DH two or three times between starts. Scouts report that Ohtani on the mound is ahead of Ohtani at the plate. Though he has given up nine runs in 2½ innings, his delivery is clean and his slider has induced gasps. He has shown raw power in batting practice but struggled with his timing in games, with just two hits in first 20 at bats. “I can only say that Shohei’s talent is real,” Scioscia said last Saturday. “Obviously we believe in it.”

In person, Ohtani is both larger and less imposing than he appears in those videos. When he isn't unfolding his 6' 4", 203-pound frame to launch 100-mph fastballs he is slouching around the clubhouse in toe socks, hands in the kangaroo pocket of his sweatshirt. He slides down his chair, groaning, when he loses a round of the video game *Clash Royale* to closer Blake Parker. He communicates almost seamlessly with his teammates through his interpreter, Ippei Mizuhara, and trades Japanese lessons for ones in Spanish; he's already made enough progress to surprise catcher Martin Maldonado, although *hombre* (man) and *hambre* (hunger) have posed a problem. He goes out to dinner with the rest of the starters, where they compare photos of their dogs.

Yet Ohtani's place in the clubhouse hierarchy is unique. In camp he missed some pitchers' fielding practice sessions—or PFPs—to hit, and skipped some batting practice sessions to throw. Then there's his impact on how the 25-man roster is constructed: If he succeeds as he did in Japan, Ohtani will essentially take up the playing time of not one player but two. The Angels acknowledge the potential for tension. Says starter Matt Shoemaker, "You could imagine guys being threatened or just being jerks—'If he doesn't have to do PFPs today, then I'm going inside'—but there's been none of that. We embrace it. Go do what you gotta do, 'cause you've gotta help us win. Go take a nap if you've gotta take a nap! I don't care."

Winning, of course, will paper over any discomfort. And this goal is what sets the up-and-down Angels apart even more than their two-way experiment. In the deepest offseason in three decades, they spent \$170 million, including Ohtani's posting fee, to try to do the most unusual thing in baseball right now: to jump from the middle of the pack straight to the top of the heap. □



S 2018] []

THE 2016 SEASON saw the end of the Cubs' 108-year curse. In '17, the Astros won the first championship in the franchise's 56 seasons. So what historic breakthrough does baseball have left for '18? The Nationals—né the Montreal Expos, in 1969—have never won a title, and Washington hasn't thrown a World Series parade since the Senators beat the New York Giants in 1924. Why shouldn't the ticker tape flutter down Constitution Avenue this fall?

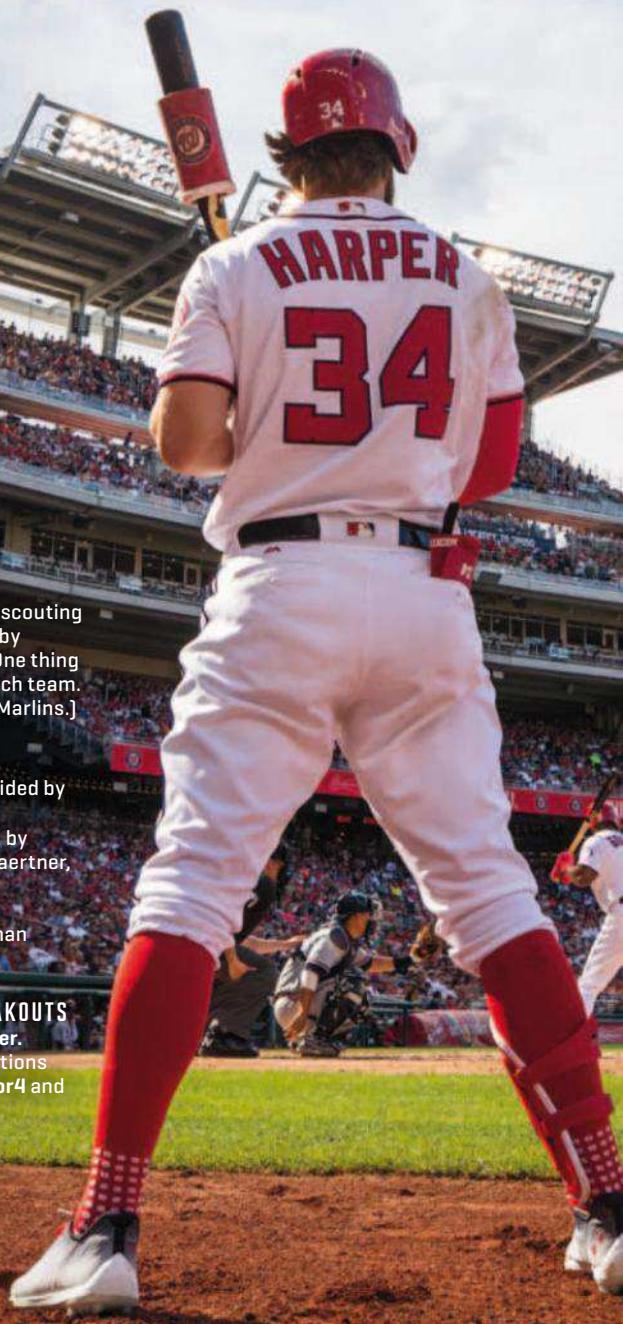
Washington is riding the wave of a new game, one driven by statistical analysis and defined by power. The Nats can go deep (Bryce Harper, Ryan Zimmerman), throw hard (Max Scherzer, Stephen Strasburg) and—just as important—spend freely. As the gap widens between the abject tankers and the true contenders, teams like Washington, with its \$175 million payroll, will find a more navigable road to October. Which isn't to say winning it all will be easy: The Dodgers can almost match the Nationals, power arm for power arm. The Cubs' lineup is the NL's deepest. The Yankees will bash their way to the AL pennant. But in the end Washington will prevail, thanks to its stars—and, yes, a little luck. Because once the games begin, you can expect surprises, all the way through to the last champagne-stained out of the postseason.

Photograph by
SIMON BRUTY

PAYOUT PITCH scouting
report entries by
Joe Sheehan: One thing
to watch for each team.
[Yes, even the Marlins.]

OVER/UNDER
win totals provided by
ODDSHARK.
Entries written by
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Connor Grossman
and Jon Tayler.

FANTASY BREAKOUTS
by **Michael Beller**.
Fantasy projections
provided by **4for4** and
MLB.com



WUTTING REPORTS



POSTSEASON PREDICTIONS

AL WILD CARD ANGELS over RED SOX	NL WILD CARD METS over DIAMONDBACKS
AL DIVISION SERIES ASTROS over ANGELS YANKEES over INDIANS	NL DIVISION SERIES NATIONALS over METS DODGERS over CUBS
AL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES YANKEES over ASTROS	NL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES NATIONALS over DODGERS

WORLD SERIES
NATIONALS over YANKEES

HOW THEY'LL FINISH

LEAGUE	DIVISION	TEAM	W-L	GB
AL EAST	1.	YANKEES	99-63	—
	2.	RED SOX	96-66	3
	3.	BLUE JAYS	83-79	16
	4.	ORIOLES	70-92	29
	5.	RAYS	67-95	32
AL CENTRAL	1.	INDIANS	98-64	—
	2.	TWINS	86-76	12
	3.	WHITE SOX	73-89	25
	4.	TIGERS	70-92	28
	5.	ROYALS	63-99	35
AL WEST	1.	ASTROS	102-60	—
	2.	ANGELS	89-73	13
	3.	MARINERS	82-80	20
	4.	RANGERS	73-89	29
	5.	A'S	67-95	35
NL EAST	1.	NATIONALS	100-62	—
	2.	METS	88-74	12
	3.	PHILLIES	74-88	26
	4.	BRAVES	73-89	27
	5.	MARLINS	63-99	37
NL CENTRAL	1.	CUBS	95-67	—
	2.	BREWERS	86-76	9
	3.	CARDINALS	85-77	10
	4.	PIRATES	70-92	25
	5.	REDS	69-93	26
NL WEST	1.	DODGERS	95-67	—
	2.	DIAMONDBACKS	88-74	7
	3.	ROCKIES	84-78	11
	4.	GIANTS	72-90	23
	5.	PADRES	70-92	25

Luis Severino





YANKEES



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP NEW YORK

Aaron Boone is a very lucky man, inheriting a good team that got even better over the winter. . . . It's a real thing, new guys coming into New York and putting too much pressure on themselves—but it's not going to happen with **Giancarlo Stanton** because he doesn't need to be *the guy*. . . . **Aaron Judge** has eight-foot-long arms so his swing gets long, but after struggling in the second half he proved in September that he can make adjustments. . . . The lightbulb went off for **Didi Gregorius**. He felt he had to be a star in Arizona and is comfortable in New York. . . . **Aaron Hicks** lifted the ball more last season and is seeing that the approach is sustainable in Yankee Stadium. . . . This is the best bullpen in baseball. **Dellin Betances** and **Dave Robertson** could close on any club, so even if **Aroldis Chapman** goes down, they're still in good shape. With that unit, you just need five, six good innings from your starters, and they'll get that on most nights. . . . **Sonny Gray** will be even better this year—he was meant to pitch on a big stage like New York. **Jordan Montgomery** has a high arm angle, a big overhand curveball, and he pitches inside with his fastball: You look at him and you see Andy Pettitte. . . . Credit to this organization: It stuck to a plan—trading veterans for prospects—and it's going to reap rewards for a while now.

OVER / UNDER

The Yankees won 91 last year but their +198 run differential suggests they should have won 99. Adding Stanton will push them close to the century mark.

99.5

→ THE LINEUP

1. LEFTFIELD
Brett Gardner
.260 BA/.15 HR/.17 SB
2. RIGHTFIELD
Aaron Judge
.253 BA/.525 SLG/.38 HR

FANTASY BREAKOUT

3. FIRST BASE
Greg Bird

.246 BA/.489 SLG/.26 HR



A lefty extreme flyball hitter, Bird has a swing that plays perfectly in Yankee Stadium.

4. DH
Giancarlo Stanton

.279 BA/.654 SLG/.54 HR

5. CATCHER
Gary Sánchez

.265 BA/.515 SLG/.30 HR

6. SHORTSTOP
Didi Gregorius

.268 BA/.20 HR/.55 SB

7. CENTERFIELD
Aaron Hicks

.249 BA/.15 HR/.10 SB

8. THIRD BASE
Brandon Drury

.261 BA/.11 HR/.2 SB

9. SECOND BASE
Neil Walker

.267 BA/.16 HR/.3 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER
Luis Severino

14 W/3.58 ERA/10.2 K9

2. RH STARTER
Masahiro Tanaka

12 W/3.99 ERA/1.20 WHP

3. RH STARTER
Sonny Gray

12 W/4.27 ERA/1.36 WHP

4. LH STARTER
CC Sabathia

9 W/4.68 ERA/1.41 WHP

- CLOSER
Aroldis Chapman

29 S/2.91 ERA/13.2 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Aaron Boone

THE PAYOFF PITCH

For anyone who grew up during Peak Steinbrenner, the most remarkable thing about the 21st-century Yankees is their stability. **Aaron Boone** becomes just their third manager in 23 seasons, following long runs by Joe Torre and Joe Girardi. Boone, who spent the last eight years in the broadcast booth, has no managerial experience, and he follows a man, in Girardi, who in most seasons helped the Yankees to a better record than their underlying performance would've suggested. It didn't help the perception of Boone's readiness when on March 10, he neglected to have a pitcher ready to replace Dellin Betances in a spring training game. The Yankees have added Giancarlo Stanton and Neil Walker to a team that was one win short of the World Series, but their year could come down to whether the rookie in the dugout can learn his job on the fly.





RED SOX



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP BOSTON

What people forget with all the hoopla about the Yankees is that this Boston team won 93 games with no power. It's not gonna be like that again, not with **J.D. Martinez**. They'll have to play Martinez in the outfield a bit, but the problem with J.D. is that he gets hurt. He's a great hitter, but they should just take his glove away from him. . . . **Rafael Devers** has a lot of work to do defensively. He needs to work on his hands. He's gonna see a lot of missiles that way in that division. . . . **Mookie Betts** is an MVP candidate, and **Xander Bogaerts** is the whole package. For Bogaerts, it's just a matter of learning from the players around him. . . . **Chris Sale** is a perennial Cy Young candidate, but he tends to wear down over the season. They have to handle him properly by resting him or letting him skip a turn. . . . Their biggest problem is screwing **David Price**'s head on right. He may be too smart for his own good. Just go out and pitch, David. When he goes to the bullpen, he's fine, because he doesn't think. **Álex Cora** will be good for him. He's a calming influence. . . . **Joe Kelly** actually has the best fastball on the club. You'd think a guy like that would be desirable to a bunch of clubs as a closer. . . . The Yankees are good, but Boston is not just going to take a back seat to New York. Their starting pitching will determine how far they go.

OVER / UNDER

Working in Boston's favor: the addition of Martinez, as well as 38 games against the O's and Rays. That alone could deliver nearly a third of last year's 93 wins.

11.5

→ THE LINEUP

1. **RIGHTFIELD**
Mookie Betts
.298 BA/.25 HR/.26 SB
2. **LEFTFIELD**
Andrew Benintendi
.284 BA/.19 HR/.17 SB
3. **FIRST BASE**
Hanley Ramírez
.265 BA/.19 HR/.5 SB
4. **DH**
J.D. Martinez
.287 BA/.563 SLG/.35 HR
5. **SHORTSTOP**
Xander Bogaerts
.287 BA/.15 HR/.13 SB

FANTASY BREAKOUT

6. **THIRD BASE**
Rafael Devers
.279 BA/.20 HR/.7 SB



The 21-year-old produced in 58 games in '17; with stars around him, he will tee off.

7. **CENTERFIELD**
Jackie Bradley Jr.
.257 BA/.18 HR/.8 SB
8. **SECOND BASE**
Dustin Pedroia
.286 BA/.9 HR/.4 SB
9. **CATCHER**
Christian Vázquez
.260 BA/.5 HR/.6 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. **LH STARTER**
Chris Sale
15 W/3.14 ERA/1.03 WHP
2. **LH STARTER**
David Price
13 W/3.75 ERA/1.19 WHP
3. **LH STARTER**
Drew Pomeranz
11 W/4.20 ERA/1.34 WHP
4. **RH STARTER**
Rick Porcello
12 W/4.40 ERA/1.26 WHP

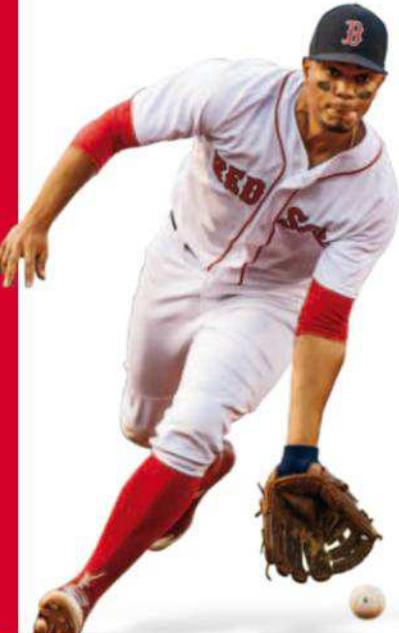
CLOSER
Craig Kimbrel
33 SV/2.63 ER/13.8 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Álex Cora

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Red Sox have so many young stars that you can lose track of them—especially the ones having an off year. **Xander Bogaerts**, 25, won a World Series ring in Boston at 20, was the everyday shortstop at 21, made the All-Star team at 23 and . . . was a mild disappointment at 24. On July 6 of last year, Bogaerts was hit on the hand by a pitch from the Rays' Jake Faria. He left the game hitting .308/.363/.455 with 30 extra-base hits. Bogaerts never went on the DL after that and never missed more than two games in a row, but the hand injury wiped out his offense. He hit .232/.321/.340 the rest of the season, with just 18 extra-base hits. If Bogaerts is more like the four-to-five win player he was in 2015 and '16, that could be enough to push the Red Sox past the Yankees in the tight AL East.





BLUE JAYS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP TORONTO

There's a range of outcomes. They could be in the wild-card hunt, but I could also see them as a 90-loss team and big sellers at the deadline. . . . It wasn't sexy, but adding **Randal Grichuk** and **Curtis Granderson** were very good moves: They're much better defensively with those two guys to go with a Gold Glove-caliber centerfielder in **Kevin Pillar**. . . . I think we can say now that **Troy Tulowitzki** will never come back to becoming the player he was—he hasn't been healthy this spring. His leg issues are a real problem. . . . **Josh Donaldson** is an MVP candidate when he's healthy, but given that he's 32 and given the way this game is trending, he's going to be in for a rude awakening in the market. Those Albert Pujols and Jayson Werth-type deals are long gone. . . . **Justin Smoak** is a classic case of a guy needing at bats to figure it out. He's a legit middle of the order guy now, a 31-year-old who's trending upward. . . . **Aaron Sanchez** is healthy and primed for a good season, but beyond that the rotation is terrifying. **Marcus Stroman** is a little guy with major torque in his delivery; his shoulder issues are frightening. . . . This organization gave up a lot to make their playoff runs a few years ago. I don't blame them for that, but now the lack of depth is really going to start to show. It's going to get worse before it gets better.

OVER / UNDER

A once vaunted lineup was—surprisingly—one of baseball's worst last year. Better health and consistency will get Toronto to over .500.

81

→ THE LINEUP

1. SECOND BASE **Devon Travis**
.275 BA/12 HR/7 SB
2. THIRD BASE **Josh Donaldson**
.273 BA/.535 SLG/35 HR
3. FIRST BASE **Justin Smoak**
.253 BA/.478 SLG/30 HR
4. DH **Kendrys Morales**
.259 BA/.466 SLG/23 HR

5. RIGHTFIELD

Randal Grichuk

.241 BA/25 HR/5 SB



As a Cardinal he hit 22 and 24 HRs the past two seasons; in Toronto, he could hit 30.

6. CENTERFIELD

Kevin Pillar

.269 BA/12 HR/16 SB HR

7. SHORTSTOP

Troy Tulowitzki

.254 BA/.439 SLG/16 HR

8. CATCHER

Russell Martin

.231 BA/.409 SLG/15 HR

9. LEFTFIELD

Curtis Granderson

.242 BA/16 HR/5 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER **Marcus Stroman**
13 W/3.88 ERA/1.32 WHP
2. LH STARTER **J.A. Happ**
11 W/4.31 ERA/1.31 WHP
3. RH STARTER **Aaron Sanchez**
8 W/4.43 ERA/1.43 WHP
4. RH STARTER **Marco Estrada**
10 W/5.01 ERA/1.36 WHP

CLOSER

Roberto Osuna

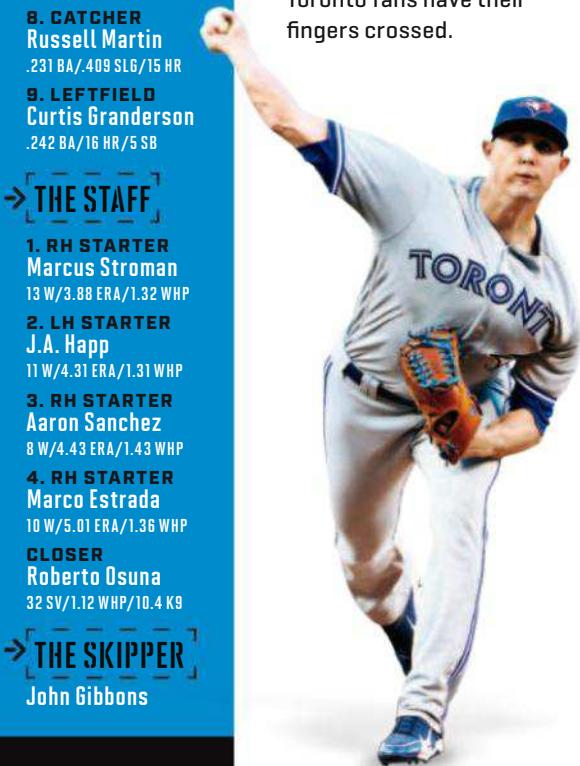
32 SV/1.12 WHP/10.4 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

John Gibbons

THE PAYOFF PITCH

One reason the Blue Jays failed to meet expectations last year was the right middle finger of righthanded starter **Aaron Sanchez**. A blister and split nail limited him to just 36 innings in 2017. An All-Star in '16 in his first full season in the rotation, Sanchez made just eight starts last year. His replacements were a disaster. Of the nine pitchers the Jays used to patch their rotation, eight had ERAs of at least 5.13. This spring Sanchez seems to have a healthy hand. In three appearances, he struck out almost a third of the batters he faced. Any chance the Jays have of pressing the Red Sox and Yankees, or of getting back to the wild-card game, starts with a full season from Sanchez. Toronto fans have their fingers crossed.



ORIOLES



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP BALTIMORE

A solid bullpen has been the bread and butter of teams that **Buck Showalter** has gotten to the postseason, but with **Zach Britton** out until June, the unit could really struggle. And with this rotation, they're going to have to turn to them early and often. . . . **Kevin Gausman** has No. 1-type stuff—the only problem is that that stuff shows up once every five starts. At this point everyone should accept that he'll never be a top-end starter. . . . We haven't seen the 99- to 100-mph fastball from **Dylan Bundy** since his arm injuries, but he's really learned how to pitch. He gives them hope, but beyond that, it's a mess. . . . This is still a dangerous team offensively. **Jonathan Schoop**'s new-found patience has made him a borderline star, and with **Manny Machado** at short, this is one of the best middle infIELDS in the league. What was behind [Machado] moving over from third? He was a \$30 million player at third; now he's a \$35 million player at short. Enough said. . . . **Adam Jones** is still a plus defender in center, but he's starting to wear and tear, just like **Chris Davis**, who made a great adjustment midway through his [2015] contract year, signed the \$161 million deal, and then went right back to his same broken approach. That contract is a disaster; it's one of the reasons why this team is trending downward.

OVER / UNDER

They made no notable moves other than add Cashner to a staff that will be dreadful regardless. Things will get worse if [when?] Machado is dealt at midseason.



THE LINEUP

1. THIRD BASE
Tim Beckham
.254 BA/21 HR/5 SB
2. SHORTSTOP
Manny Machado
.284 BA/36 HR/9 SB
3. SECOND BASE
Jonathan Schoop
.270 BA/30 HR/2 SB
4. CENTERFIELD
Adam Jones
.271 BA/27 HR/3 SB
5. LEFTFIELD
Trey Mancini
.271 BA/22 HR/2 SB
6. FIRST BASE
Chris Davis
.225 BA/.473 SLG/31 HR
7. DH
Mark Trumbo
.249 BA/.476 SLG/24 HR
8. RIGHTFIELD
Colby Rasmus
.229 BA/17 HR/3 SB

9. CATCHER

Chance Sisco
.253 BA/6 HR/3 SB



The top prospect's fantasy stock rises with the thin depth at the position this year.

FANTASY BREAKOUT

THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER
Kevin Gausman
11 W/4.48 ERA/1.34 WHIP
2. RH STARTER
Dylan Bundy
10 W/5.00 ERA/1.37 WHIP
3. RH STARTER
Chris Tillman
6 W/5.68 ERA/1.57 WHIP
4. RH STARTER
Andrew Cashner
7 W/5.40 ERA/1.54 WHIP

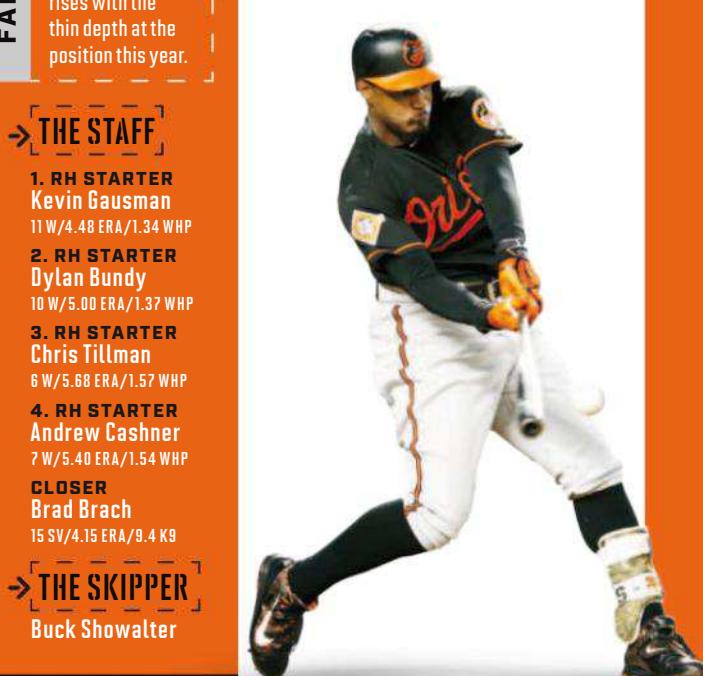
CLOSER
Brad Brach
15 SV/4.15 ERA/9.4 K9

THE SKIPPER

Buck Showalter

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The focus in Baltimore this year will be on **Manny Machado**, in what will certainly be the shortstop's final season by the Chesapeake. We could also be seeing the end of **Adam Jones**'s time in black and orange. Jones, 32, is climbing the franchise leader boards, and in 2018 he should pass **Brooks Robinson** for fourth in homers, **Ken Williams** for sixth in RBI and a number of players to jump to seventh in plate appearances. He is already in the top five in franchise history in hits and top 10 in games played. Jones is declining gracefully, hitting .285 with 26 homers last year, while playing in 147 games. He is still helping the Orioles win, if perhaps this year for the final time. Like Machado, he too can leave as a free agent after '18.



RAYS



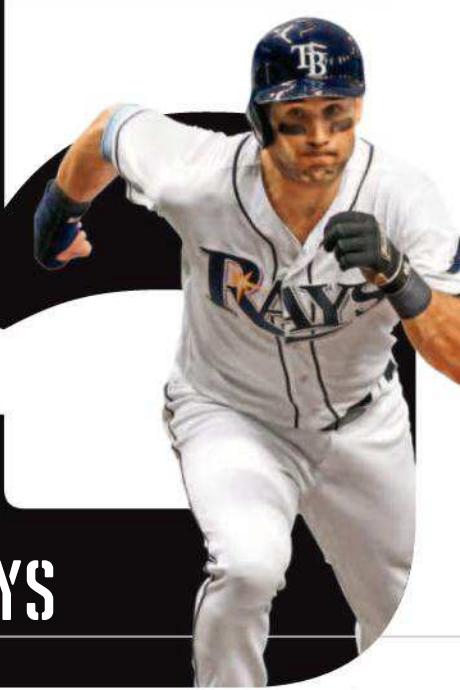
ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP TAMPA BAY

They're trying a four-man rotation. It's probably gonna be a two-man rotation by the trade deadline. . . . There's upside in the rotation. **Chris Archer** will bounce back and **Blake Snell** has made real strides, commanding his breaking ball and fastball to both sides. He could be an All-Star. . . . **Nate Eovaldi** throws 99 but makes no adjustments. Confidence is an issue—good thing is, he won't be as scared as he was in New York, because he'll be pitching in front of 2,500 people. . . . Their best arm is prospect **José Alvarado**. Whether he can harness his arm is another question. He throws 97, 98, with a slider at 82; we'll see him by season's end. . . . **Alex Colomé** is no Kimbrel or Jansen, but he could be a closer on a contender; he's a big trade piece in July if he's pitching well. . . . **Kevin Kiermaier** showed some surprising pop last year and **C.J. Cron** is another power guy who can hit the ball over the fence, but otherwise the Rays aren't gonna do that very often. . . . When he came up, I thought **Adeiny Hechavarria** was gonna win a Gold Glove or two. Now I'm sure he won't. He just makes too many careless mistakes. . . . **Wilson Ramos** is a good hitter—now that he got his eyes fixed. With Evan Longoria gone, Ramos will emerge as one of the veteran leaders. . . . They've got a chance to be the worst team in the AL.

OVER / UNDER

The list of players jettisoned this offseason practically assures they won't match last year's 80 wins. With more trades to come, they won't even come close to it.



→ THE LINEUP

1. DH Denard Span .326 OBP/9 HR/13 SB
2. CENTERFIELD Kevin Kiermaier .254 BA/18 HR/17 SB
3. THIRD BASE Matt Duffy .262 BA/8 HR/10 SB
4. RIGHTFIELD Carlos Gómez .239 BA/14 HR/15 SB
5. SECOND BASE Brad Miller .239 BA/14 HR/7 SB
6. CATCHER Wilson Ramos .260 BA/.435 SLG/15 HR
7. FIRST BASE C.J. Cron .445 SLG/19 HR/4 SB
8. SHORTSTOP Adeiny Hechavarria .252 BA/5 HR/3 SB
9. LEFTFIELD Mallex Smith .251 BA/4 HR/20 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER Chris Archer 12 W/3.49 ERA/1.17 WHIP
2. RH STARTER Jake Faria 8 W/1.34 WHIP/9.2 K9
3. LH STARTER Blake Snell 10 W/3.80 ERA/9.4 K9
4. RH STARTER Nathan Eovaldi 7 W/4.06 ERA/1.30 WHIP

CLOSER
Alex Colomé
33 SV/3.74 ERA/8.7 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Kevin Cash

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Rays traded both Corey Dickerson and Steven Souza this offseason, creating an opportunity for one of the fastest players in baseball, **Mallex Smith**. Smith, 24, has stolen 32 bases in 153 career games in the majors, and 251 in 446 minor league games. He's not a glorified pinch runner, either; he hit .294 coming through the Padres, Braves and Rays systems, with a .393 slugging percentage, and he draws walks—about 10% of at bats in both the minors and majors. Smith has the skills to apply that speed to winning games. He tied for the Rays' lead in steals last year with 16 in just 81 games played. With only oldsters Denard Span and Carlos Gómez in his way, Smith should be free to play every day in leftfield and become one of the top leadoff hitters in the league.



FANTASY BREAKOUT



If he cut the walks (3.2 per game), Faria is a top-of-the-rotation pitcher.

3. LH STARTER Blake Snell 10 W/3.80 ERA/9.4 K9
4. RH STARTER Nathan Eovaldi 7 W/4.06 ERA/1.30 WHIP

CLOSER
Alex Colomé
33 SV/3.74 ERA/8.7 K9

→ THE SKIPPER
Kevin Cash



José Ramírez



INDIANS



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP CLEVELAND

They fell short last year, but I thought they were the best team in baseball. . . . People are starting to realize how good **Carlos Carrasco** is, and he's starting to realize it too. This guy has some of the best stuff in baseball—power fastball, plus slider, plus splitter—and last year he was more confident, finally aggressive in pitching in to both sides. . . . **Trevor Bauer**'s like the chef who's constantly tinkering with his recipes. His problems have been from tinkering too much. I think he's learned what works for him—the increased use of the curveball, for one thing, and I wouldn't be surprised if he takes a big step. . . . **Danny Salazar** has elite stuff, but he can't stay healthy. Why not move him to the bullpen to fill Bryan Shaw's spot? As a one-inning guy, airing it out, he could be dominant. . . . A healthy **Michael Brantley** is one of the best leftfielders in baseball, but if **Yonder Alonso** gets off to a bad start, they should move Brantley to first to minimize the running he has to do. . . . **Bradley Zimmer** covers so much ground in center, has a huge arm and has surprisingly big opposite-field power. He's going to be an All-Star. . . . There are a lot of similarities between Gary Sánchez and **Francisco Mejía**, with the way he generates pull-side power. He has every tool in the world to be a very good catcher.

OVER / UNDER

The bullpen losses of Joe Smith and Bryan Shaw hurt, but the rotation and continued progression of Lindor and Ramírez keep the Tribe in the AL's upper class.

14.5

→ THE LINEUP

1. SHORTSTOP Francisco Lindor .293 BA/25 HR/17 SB
2. 2ND BASE Jason Kipnis .261 BA/14 HR/11 SB
3. 3RD BASE José Ramírez .298 BA/21 HR/22 SB
4. DH Edwin Encarnación .258 BA/.505 SLG/34 HR
5. LEFTFIELD Michael Brantley .295 BA/13 HR/12 SB

FANTASY BREAKOUT

6. CENTERFIELD Bradley Zimmer .238 BA/15 HR/25 SB



He has 30-SB potential, and the HR total should rise.

7. 1STBASE Yonder Alonso .266 BA/21 HR/3 SB
8. RIGHTFIELD Lonnie Chisenhall .259 BA/12 HR/4 SB
9. CATCHER Roberto Pérez .218 BA/.380 SLG/7 HR

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER Corey Kluber 18 W/1.08 WHP/10.4 K9
2. RH STARTER Carlos Carrasco 12 W/1.16 WHP/9.6 K9
3. RH STARTER Trevor Bauer 11 W/4.16 ERA/1.32 WHP
4. RH STARTER Josh Tomlin 7 W/4.80 ERA/1.28 WHP

CLOSER
Cody Allen
22 SV/3.74 ERA/10.7 K9

- THE SKIPPER Terry Francona

THE PAYOFF PITCH

One of the quirks of the Indians' two-year run in the AL Central is how little value their outfielders have produced. With anchor **Michael Brantley** missing the better part of two years with injuries, the team has been filling with prospects [Bradley Zimmer], converted infielders [Lonnie Chisenhall, Jason Kipnis] and trade pickups [Jay Bruce]. The Indians declined to address the situation in the offseason, their big move being the signing of first baseman Yonder Alonso. They're committed to Brantley, Zimmer and Chisenhall. Combined, those three played just 273 games last year, and none in the postseason. The unit, when healthy, has upside. Keep an eye on those three outfielders: They're key to the Indians' third straight division title.





TWINS



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP MINNESOTA

Last season was a bit of a magical year in which everything went right. The biggest breakthrough was **Byron Buxton**. You started hearing Willie Mays comparisons last season, and you know what? They weren't totally crazy: He's got every tool out there, and he's putting it all together. He and Billy Hamilton need to have a footrace to see who's the fastest guy in the game. . . . One guy I'm concerned about is **Miguel Sanó**. He's not moving well at all—he looks like Mo Vaughn at the end of his career. He's been dealing with off-field stuff and coming off an injury; there are big-time red flags. . . . This is a good offense. **Brian Dozier** is as consistent as they come, and **Logan Morrison** was a really smart signing. Now he and **Joe Mauer** can split first base and DH, and that will do wonders for both; they'll get very good production from both positions. . . . The rotation is a little short. They need **José Berrios** to emerge as the ace. His curveball has always been elite, but he was struggling with his confidence going into the season. The World Baseball Classic did wonders for him in that area. **Jake Odorizzi** was a nice addition, and **Kyle Gibson** has his arm strength back after some injuries, but they need another frontline starter if they want to make a run at a wild-card spot.

OVER / UNDER

A **pitching** staff with a dismal 4.59 ERA didn't stop the team from winning 85 last year. If Berrios emerges as an ace, the Twins will flirt with 90 wins.

70 5

→ THE LINEUP

1. SECOND BASE Brian Dozier .257 BA/.309 HR/15 SB
2. FIRST BASE Joe Mauer .367 OBP/.411 SLG/10 HR
3. THIRD BASE Miguel Sanó .249 BA/.509 SLG/29 HR
4. DH Logan Morrison .252 BA/.464 SLG/21 HR
5. LEFTFIELD Eddie Rosario .272 BA/.22 HR/9 SB

FANTASY BREAKOUT

6. CENTERFIELD Byron Buxton .251 BA/.20 HR/24 SB



Buxton, 24, hit .300/.347/.546 with 11 homers and 13 steals in the second half.

7. RIGHTFIELD Max Kepler .257 BA/.17 HR/7 SB
8. SHORTSTOP Eduardo Escobar .263 BA/.9 HR/2 SB
9. CATCHER Jason Castro .230 BA/.314 OBP/10 HR

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER Ervin Santana 9 W/4.82 ERA/1.37 WHP
2. RH STARTER José Berrios 10 W/4.58 ERA/1.33 WHP
3. RH STARTER Jake Odorizzi 8 W/5.07 ERA/1.40 WHP
4. RH STARTER Kyle Gibson 10 W/4.58 ERA/1.43 WHP

CLOSER
Fernando Rodney 30 SV/4.29 ERA/8.7 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Paul Molitor

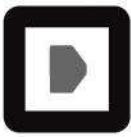
THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Twins made the playoffs for the first time since 2010 by upgrading a porous defense with young talent. Byron Buxton, 24, and Max Kepler, 25, helped Minnesota move from last in the AL in turning balls in play into outs to seventh. Now the team has to fix the other part of the run-prevention equation: keeping balls out of play. The Twins were 14th in the league in strikeout rate, the seventh straight season they've been 13th or worse. Adding Lance Lynn and Jake Odorizzi, who struck out 21% of the batters he faced last year, will help. The emergence of lefty **Adalberto Mejía** (19% as a rookie) should also push the team's whiff rate higher. If the pitchers can produce even an average strikeout rate, the team—with its solid defense—could be back in the postseason.





WHITE SOX



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP CHICAGO

It's gonna be a rough year, but they're headed in the right direction. . . . There will be growing pains with **Yoan Moncada**. He's got a little hand hitch in his swing, which really affects his timing. He's been really bad on off-speed pitches this spring. If he struggles, he should go back to Charlotte. . . . **Tim Anderson** needs to work on his strike-zone discipline. Every advance report on this guy is that you don't have to throw him good pitches. . . . **Avisail García** got himself into shape. Guys killed him with the fastball in, but he made an adjustment. . . . **James Shields** is their Opening Day starter but in reality he's a fifth starter. He doesn't have a plus-plus fastball and changeup anymore. The biggest contribution he'll make is being a mentor to the young starters. . . . **Reynaldo López** has a big fastball—95 to 99—and a good curveball. He's got to command his fastball down better. . . . **Lucas Giolito** is big—6' 6", 248—but he doesn't have a big fastball: just 90 to 95. There are issues with his arm action—a deep arm swing that he's going to have to smooth out. . . . Michael Kopech will dominate Triple A, but to be a major leaguer he has to develop his command. He's got the body and the athleticism and throws 100. They've done a great job collecting great young pitchers, and Kopech has the highest ceiling of all of them.

OVER / UNDER

The Sox are in full rebuild mode, but there's too much young talent—Moncada, Giolito and López are all ready to make an impact—for them to be miserable.



→ THE LINEUP

1. SHORTSTOP
Tim Anderson
.264 BA/14 HR/14 SB

2. SECOND BASE

Yoan Moncada
.242 BA/18 HR/24 SB



His first crack at a full season; 20 homers, 20 steals is within reach.

3. FIRST BASE
José Abreu
.289 BA/.519 SLG/30 HR

4. RIGHTFIELD
Avisail García
.282 BA/19 HR/6 SB

5. CATCHER
Welington Castillo
.244 BA/.427 SLG/16 HR

6. LEFTFIELD
Nicky Delmonico
.244 BA/.431 SLG/18 HR

7. DH
Matt Davidson
.211 BA/.398 SLG/22 HR

8. CENTERFIELD
Adam Engel
.205 BA/9 HR/19 SB

9. THIRD BASE
Yolmer Sánchez
.248 BA/10 HR/9 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER
James Shields
7 W/5.54 ERA/1.51 WHP

2. RH STARTER
Lucas Giolito
7 W/5.02 ERA/1.50 WHP

3. RH STARTER
Reynaldo López
6 W/5.10 ERA/1.45 WHP

4. RH STARTER
Carson Fulmer
5 W/5.85 ERA/1.66 WHP

CLOSER
Joakim Soria
5 SV/3.88 ERA/9.3 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Rick Renteria

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The White Sox bottomed out last season, the first of their rebuild. They won't contend for a playoff berth in 2018, but they will start putting the team on the field that will do so beginning in '20, the one GM Rick Hahn built with aggressive trades in the '16–17 offseason. Lucas Giolito and Reynaldo López will open the season in the starting rotation, with Yoan Moncada at second base. Power righty Michael Kopech, a top 10 prospect, should be up later in the year. Prospect hounds can track outfielder Eloy Jiménez and righties Dylan Cease and Alec Hansen, all top 100 types on track for debuts next year. There's a championship-caliber core being assembled on the South Side—the Sox are roughly where the Cubs were in '13, and we saw the results of that makeover.





TIGERS



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP DETROIT

Poor **Ron Gardenhire**. He came out of retirement for this? Last year in Detroit was bad, but it's going to get worse. With the spots up for grabs, it was a tryout camp there this spring. . . . **Miguel Cabrera** days as an MVP-caliber guy are long gone, but he's in better shape and is smart enough to be an above-average hitter until his 40s. . . . **Nick Castellanos** is one of the few guys in the lineup trending upward—he's got 30 home run, .285 potential. . . . **Jeimer Candelario** will get all the at bats he can handle, and he will surprise people. He brings 20-homer potential and some much-needed energy to this team. . . . **Victor Martinez** still gives you a quality at bat and finds ways to get on base, but you can't count on getting a full season from him. Beyond that? It's ugly, man. . . . **Michael Fulmer** lacks the strikeout upside to make him a topflight pitcher. That's why they need \$110 million man **Jordan Zimmermann** to bounce back from his nightmare season, and I think he will. If he's mechanically off just a bit, his ball gets flat and he elevates in the zone. He can fix that. . . . It's only a matter of time before **Joe Jiménez** takes over for **Shane Greene** as the closer. Jiménez has improved his slider—he's a young guy with promise on a team that doesn't offer a whole lot of that.

OVER / UNDER

The **rebuild** is under way, but there are also enough bounce-back candidates—Cabrera, most notably—to believe they can improve on their 64 wins from 2017.

65

→ THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD

Leony Martín
.248 BA/8 HR/24 SB

2. LEFTFIELD

Mikie Mahtook
.255 BA/12 HR/8 SB

3. FIRST BASE

Miguel Cabrera
.286 BA/.493 SLG/24 HR

4. RIGHTFIELD

Nick Castellanos
.279 BA/.489 SLG/24 HR

5. DH

Victor Martinez
.269 BA/.423 SLG/14 HR

6. CATCHER

James McCann
.250 BA/11 HR/2 SB

7. THIRD BASE

Jeimer Candelario
.249 BA/15 HR/1 SB

8. SECOND BASE

Dixon Machado
.260 BA/4 HR/7 SB

9. SHORTSTOP

José Iglesias
.272 BA/5 HR/8 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER

Michael Fulmer
10 W/4.32 ERA/1.33 WHP

2. LH STARTER

Daniel Norris
6 W/4.82 ERA/7.6 K9



A 24% K-rate over 10 games in '17 showed his upside.

3. RH STARTER

Jordan Zimmermann
8 W/5.26 ERA/1.41 WHP

4. RH STARTER

Mike Fiers
7 W/5.09 ERA/1.42 WHP

CLOSER

Shane Greene
26 SV/4.02 ERA/9 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Ron Gardenhire

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Tigers' rebuilding process split up the two anchors of the team's mini AL Central dynasty. While Justin Verlander is gone, **Miguel Cabrera** remains. Cabrera, 34, had the worst season of his career in 2017, batting .249/.329/.399 with 16 homers. Guaranteed \$192 million through 2023, the two-time MVP is essentially untradable, so his career is at a crossroads: Albert Pujols one way, Hank Aaron the other. There is reason for hope. Even in a lost year, Cabrera was well above average in exit velocity on fly balls and line drives (33rd of 334 hitters, 95.2 mph), a sign that he still has the bat speed and power to be a star, if not the .330 hitter he was for eight seasons. In what will be a long year for Tigers fans, they should still be able to appreciate one of the greatest righthanded hitters in baseball history.





ROYALS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP KANSAS CITY

Their offense is putrid. It's going to be a long year. . . . **Salvador Pérez** has made a concerted effort to stay on pitches and go the other way, and he's becoming more of an offensive threat. He still moves well behind the plate. . . . **Lucas Duda** is not really the answer to anybody's hopes or dreams. He's a platoon-type player you can hit against right-handed pitching. . . . **Whit Merrifield** uses all fields. He steps in the box like he's got some veteran swagger to him. . . . **Mike Moustakas** has average range and hands, but he gives them plus home run production, which they'll really need. . . . **Jorge Soler** is a teaser-type talent. He's got all sorts of tools, but it never comes together. . . . It looked like there was a lot of guess hitting during **Alex Gordon**'s at bats, where he was late to velocity. . . . **Danny Duffy**'s changeup was the best pitch he had when we faced him, plus at times. But he's never given you close to 200 innings, and you're asking him to take on a higher workload at the front of the rotation. . . . **Ian Kennedy** is going to get hit if he makes mistakes in the middle of the zone. He's at best a good fifth starter in a decent rotation. It's a stretch for him to be a No. 2. . . . **Kelvin Herrera**'s velocity is 96–99, so the arm strength is back. If he can incorporate the curveball, that'll be a weapon for him. It looked pretty good.

DAVE REGNER/GETTY IMAGES (FULMER); TONY FIORO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (NORRIS); DUSTIN BRADFORD/GETTY IMAGES (CABRERA); JUAN BURLESON/GETTY IMAGES (MERRIFIELD); CHRIS BERNACCHI/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (SOLER); TOM SZCZERBOWSKI/GETTY IMAGES (MONDSEI)

OVER / UNDER

The Royals won 80 games last season and were trying. Now that K.C. is in clear rebuilding mode—and will be deadline sellers—70 wins is pushing it.

71.5

2018 MLB PREVIEW • AL CENTRAL

→ THE LINEUP

1. LEFTFIELD **Alex Gordon**
.236 BA/.14 HR/6 SB
2. SECOND BASE **Whit Merrifield**
.277 BA/.12 HR/28 SB
3. FIRST BASE **Lucas Duda**
.237 BA/.484 SLG/22 HR
4. CATCHER **Salvatore Pérez**
.260 BA/.462 SLG/23 HR
5. THIRD BASE **Mike Moustakas**
.267 BA/.496 SLG/28 HR
6. CENTERFIELD **Paulo Orlando**
.261 BA/5 HR/6 SB

FANTASY BREAKOUT

7. DH **Jorge Soler**



Dozes potential but needs consistent production. He'll get all the ABs he can handle.

8. RIGHTFIELD **Jon Jay**

.272 BA/5 HR/5 SB

9. SHORTSTOP **Alcides Escobar**

.258 BA/5 HR/9 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. LH STARTER **Danny Duffy**

10 W/4.31 ERA/1.30 WHP

2. RH STARTER **Ian Kennedy**

8 W/5.08 ERA/1.41 WHP

3. RH STARTER **Jason Hammel**

8 W/5.02 ERA/1.37 WHP

4. RH STARTER **Nathan Karns**

5 W/4.43 ERA/1.34 WHP

- CLOSER **Kelvin Herrera**

31 SV/3.74 ERA/9.0 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Ned Yost

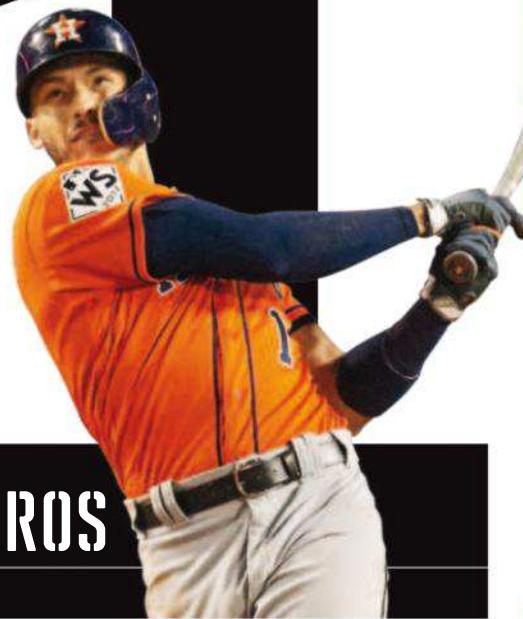
THE PAYOFF PITCH

Two seasons removed from their world championship, the Royals are entering a rebuild. Some familiar faces—**Danny Duffy**, **Alcides Escobar**, **Alex Gordon**, **Kelvin Herrera**, **Mike Moustakas**—remain, but with the loss of most of their core players, this isn't a contending team. It could still be entertaining, though, especially if **Adalberto Mondesi**, son of ex-Dodgers star Raúl, plays second base. In just 60 plate appearances in 2017, reaching base 12 times, he attempted a whopping seven steals and swiped five bases. Mondesi has 116 steals in six seasons in the minors. It remains to be seen if he can manage the strike zone in the majors. A .305 career batting average at Triple A is leavened by 105 strikeouts and just 18 unintentional walks. If he gets regular at bats in K.C., Mondesi could lead the AL in stolen bases.



Justin Verlander





ASTROS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP HOUSTON

A lot of guys had career years last season—but to think there's a drop-off coming is delusional. The scary thing? You go down the roster, and there are guys who will be *better* this year. . . . **Alex Bregman** broke out in the second half, and hitting in front of guys like **Carlos Correa**, he's going to get a ton of fastballs to feast on. . . . **George Springer** continued to improve in hitting for contact and started to hit for more power. You add the defense he brings, he's an MVP candidate. . . . Catcher is an area they will need to address: **Brian McCann** is trending downward—the days of him starting 100 games are over—and backup **Max Stassi** is not an answer. . . . The rotation will be better with a full season from **Justin Verlander**. He logged a lot of postseason innings, but he looked better than ever this spring. He'll pick up where he left off. . . . They're getting the **Gerrit Cole** who struggled last year; he had a dozen starts that were horrendous. The velocity is there, but there's clearly some flaw in there that's getting him to elevate the ball, and the move to the AL won't help matters. . . . Don't read too much into the bullpen's postseason struggles. **Ken Giles** was dominant in the second half, and that means more than a few bad playoff outings. . . . They're just so deep, with plenty of pieces they can move at the deadline if they need to.

OVER / UNDER

After shoring up their rotation with Cole and a full season of Verlander, the Astros will make a run at the franchise wins record of 102, set in 1998.

06.5

THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD
George Springer
.270 BA/.501 SLG/30 HR

2. THIRD BASE

Alex Bregman
.274 BA/22 HR/15 SB



His star turn began last year; eligibility at shortstop boosts his fantasy value.

3. SECOND BASE

José Altuve

.314 BA/20 HR/33 SB

4. SHORTSTOP

Carlos Correa

.517 SLG/27 HR/7 SB

5. RIGHTFIELD

Josh Reddick

.278 BA/17 HR/7 SB

6. FIRST BASE

Yuli Gurriel

.285 BA/17 HR/3 SB

7. LEFTFIELD

Marwin Gonzalez

.264 BA/17 HR/8 SB

8. DH

Evan Gattis

.254 BA/.484 SLG/23 HR

9. CATCHER

Brian McCann

.241 BA/.429 SLG/17 HR

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER

Justin Verlander

14 W/3.84 ERA/1.20 WHP

2. LH STARTER

Dallas Keuchel

14 W/3.70 ERA/1.31 WHP

3. RH STARTER

Gerrit Cole

12 W/4.17 ERA/1.26 WHP

4. RH STARTER

Lance McCullers Jr.

10 W/3.62 ERA/9.6 K9

5. CLOSER

Ken Giles

33 SV/3.18 ERA/11.9 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

A.J. Hinch

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Astros didn't rest on their laurels, using their depth to acquire righty **Gerrit Cole** from the Pirates. Cole was a minor disappointment in Pittsburgh, never meeting the expectation that he would be an ace. Some of the problems may have been repertoire. Cole never quite fit into the Pirates' plan of having their pitchers throw two-seam fastballs to get ground balls. In 2017, he got away from that approach and returned to using his four-seam fastball and sharp breaking stuff more, and his two-seamer and change less. By September he was striking out 28% of the hitters he faced, up from 21% in the first half. If the Astros let Cole be who he is—a traditional four-seam fastball/breaking ball pitcher—they may well have traded for a No. 1 starter at a No. 3 price.



ANGELS



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP LOS ANGELES

If the Astros falter for some reason, I could see the Angels challenging them. . . . I tip my hat to [GM] Billy Eppler because he's not scared to make a move. They had a problem at second, so they got **Ian Kinsler**. Luis Valbuena was O.K. at third, but they went and got a better guy in **Zack Cozart**. **Justin Upton** would have been out of his mind tearing up his contract, so he made a sound decision to stay. . . . **Shohei Ohtani** is as advertised. He's one of the cleanest pitchers you'll ever see. Delivery is perfect. Rhythm is impeccable. Ball comes out of the same spot every time. . . . I know those cats are in shape in Japan because of how much harder they train than we do in the spring, but this is another level and another league, and I think where Ohtani's going to struggle is with the bat. . . . They're going with a six-man rotation, and every guy is healthy. **Garrett Richards**'s stuff is as nasty and filthy as anybody's in the league. **Tyler Skaggs** and **Andrew Heaney** are two lefties who have been talked about and will now get their opportunities. . . . **Albert Pujols** needs to get on Bartolo Colón's diet. He looks lean through the neck and the head, and his pants are a little baggy. They didn't pay Pujols to run, they paid him to hit homers, and the ball isn't jumping off his bat.

OVER / UNDER

The rotation is shaky, but with an improved lineup to supplement the best player in baseball, the Angels are primed for their first playoff appearance since 2014.



→ THE LINEUP

1. SECOND BASE
Ian Kinsler
.258 BA/18 HR/11 SB
2. CENTERFIELD
Mike Trout
.427 OBP/38 HR/24 SB
3. LEFTFIELD
Justin Upton
.245 BA/31 HR/13 SB
4. DH
Albert Pujols
.255 BA/.431 SLG/21 HR
5. RIGHTFIELD
Kole Calhoun
.257 BA/20 HR/4 SB
6. THIRD BASE
Zack Cozart
.256 BA/16 HR/3 SB
7. FIRST BASE
Luis Valbuena
.227 BA/.427 SLG/17 HR
8. SHORTSTOP
Andrelton Simmons
.271 BA/11 HR/13 SB
9. CATCHER
Martín Maldonado
.222 BA/10 HR/3 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER
Garrett Richards
11W/3.74 ERA/1.30 WHP
2. LH STARTER
Andrew Heaney
6W/4.38 ERA/1.30 WHP
3. RH STARTER
Shohei Ohtani
10W/3.58 ERA/1.21 WHP
4. LH STARTER
Tyler Skaggs
8W/4.20 ERA/1.31 WHP

FANTASY BREAKOUT

CLOSER **Blake Parker**

11 SV/3.46 ERA/10.2 K9



Parker struck out one-third of the batters he faced in 2017.

→ THE SKIPPER

Mike Scioscia

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Angels have no shortage of compelling players, from the finest all-around [Mike Trout] to the best on defense [Andrelton Simmons] to the first pitcher-hitter since Babe Ruth [Shohei Ohtani]. If all of them want to keep playing into October, though, they will need ace **Garrett Richards** to stay healthy. It's no coincidence that the only two seasons in the last five in which Los Angeles has finished above .500 were the two in which Richards qualified for the ERA title. The righthander has a 2.31 ERA over the past two years, but he has made just 12 total starts: A torn UCL wiped out 2016, and a biceps nerve problem shelved him for most of '17. Adding Ohtani and going to a six-man rotation will lessen Richards's workload, but unless the 29-year-old stays on the mound, the Angels will again fall short of their expectations.



MARINERS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP SEATTLE

The Mariners absolutely need to make the playoffs. It'll be a dogfight between them and the Angels. . . . Everything comes down to **Félix Hernández**. He can command his stuff and work both sides, but he seemed to lose his command last year. . . . If **James Paxton** is healthy, he's a Cy Young-quality lefty, but he's struggled a bit this spring. If he wants to be an ace, you need to see some consistency. . . . Offensively, it's hard to get better than them, but they need to get more production out of leftfield. **Mitch Haniger** has a chance to be really good; **Ben Gamel** had a good year but has no power. I really like **Guillermo Heredia** now that he's healthy. He can hit. . . . I'm not crazy about the way he plays, but **Robinson Canó**'s swing is so smooth, he makes the game look easy. . . . **Jean Segura** used to be one of my favorite players because he played recklessly. Ever since he's been around Canó, he's been cool. I'm not big on cool players, but he and Canó are a good combo. . . . **Dee Gordon** brings a whole new element to the top of the lineup. He'll do fine on the adjustment to centerfield because of his athleticism. He's got a pretty good arm out there. . . . I'll give you two words why **Scott Servais** is the manager: GM **Jerry Dipoto**. If they don't make the playoffs, heads will roll, but the front office will give Servais every opportunity.

OVER / UNDER

There's enough talent in the lineup to finish over .500, but because of the rotation beyond Paxton and Hernández, a 16-year playoff drought will continue.

81



2018 MLB PREVIEW • AL WEST

→ THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD

Dee Gordon

.279 BA/5 HR/45 SB



The three-time SB leader in the NL should see his numbers rise in the AL.

2. SHORTSTOP

Jean Segura

.274 BA/13 HR/25 SB

3. SECOND BASE

Robinson Canó

.282 BA/24 HR/2 SB

4. DH

Nelson Cruz

.266 BA/.515 SLG/34 HR

5. 3RD BASE

Kyle Seager

.267 BA/27 HR/3 SB

6. FIRST BASE

Ryon Healy

.256 BA/.426 SLG/18 HR

7. RIGHTFIELD

Mitch Haniger

.252 BA/20 HR/7 SB

8. CATCHER

Mike Zunino

.220 BA/24 HR/1 SB

9. LEFTFIELD

Ichiro Suzuki

.258 BA/2 HR/3 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. LH STARTER

James Paxton

12 W/3.54 ERA/1.21 WHP

2. RH STARTER

Félix Hernández

9 W/4.38 ERA/1.36 WHP

3. RH STARTER

Mike Leake

10 W/4.59 ERA/1.36 WHP

4. RH STARTER

Erasmo Ramírez

7 W/4.77 ERA/1.39 WHP

CLOSER

Edwin Díaz

4 W/3.18 ERA/11.6 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Scott Servais

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Mariners have the longest playoff drought in major U.S. sports, stretching back to 2001. Bringing back Ichiro—that season's AL MVP—is a nice bit of karma, but their chance to snap the skein is more about **James Paxton**'s left arm. Paxton has a 3.28 ERA in 422 major league innings, but those innings are scattered over five years, with a high of 136 in 2017. Paxton has never been ineffective in the majors, and at 29, he's never been able to stay healthy in the majors. At his best, as he was last year, Paxton can front the rotation of a playoff team. The Mariners, with a shallow, shaky rotation, need him to stay on the mound for 30 starts and 200 innings to have any chance of breaking their streak. He's the one essential player on this roster.



RANGERS



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP TEXAS

The Rangers are going to battle Oakland for the cellar. I'm not high on them at all. . . . They're so one-dimensional offensively. It's the era of launch angle and exit velocity, and everyone in that lineup is going up there looking to do damage. Except **Delino DeShields**. . . . If they're going to compete, they need **Adrian Beltre**. He's the warden over there. . . . **Elvis Andrus** is finally turning the corner. I'd love to see him be more consistent and play a little meaner. . . . **Nomar Mazara** could be the second coming of Carlos Delgado. He's one of the best hitters I saw anywhere last year. . . . I guess **Rougned Odor** has walked four times in spring training; I don't think he walked four times all last year. They shouldn't change his disposition that he's the baddest cat on the planet. He just needs to swing at strikes. . . . **Joey Gallo** has the best power in the game, but he racks up 200 K's. With pitching declining in terms of guys being able to attack in quadrants, there are lots of mistakes to hit, and Gallo will punish those. . . . If you look at the rotation, it's **Cole Hamels** and who else? **Doug Fister**? **Matt Moore**? When Moore loses, he just can't find it. It's too bad because he's such a tease when he's on. He'll have to figure it out quickly because the ball will be flying out of the yard in Texas.

OVER / UNDER

Texas is stuck between contending and tanking. Come July, when Hamels and Beltre are on the trade block, it'll be clear which direction the Rangers are heading.



MARCH 26, 2018



THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD
Delino DeShields
.246 BA/.9 HR/33 SB
2. SHORTSTOP
Elvis Andrus
.280 BA/12 HR/24 SB
3. DH
Shin-Soo Choo
.258 BA/20 HR/8 SB
4. THIRD BASE
Adrian Beltre
.282 BA/.471 SLG/20 HR
5. FIRST BASE
Joey Gallo
.219 BA/.509 SLG/38 HR
6. CATCHER
Robinson Chirinos
.229 BA/.433 SLG/15 HR

FANTASY BREAKOUT

7. RIGHTFIELD
Nomar Mazara
.273 BA/.462 SLG/25 HR



Mazara, 22, has hit 20 HRs two straight years; an All-Star season is coming.

8. LEFTFIELD
Willie Calhoun
.277 BA/24 HR/3 SB
9. SECOND BASE
Rougned Odor
.256 BA/29 HR/14 SB

THE STAFF

1. LH STARTER
Cole Hamels
11 W/4.65 ERA/1.42 WHP
2. LH STARTER
Martin Perez
8 W/4.87 ERA/1.52 WHP
3. RH STARTER
Doug Fister
10 W/4.92 ERA/1.47 WHP
4. LH STARTER
Matt Moore
8 W/5.29 ERA/1.48 WHP

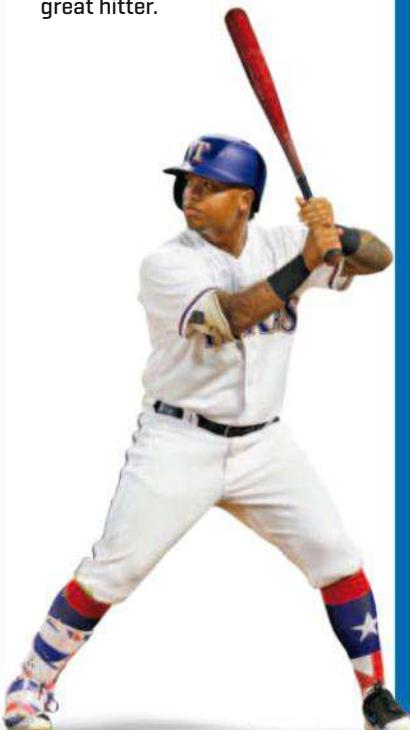
CLOSER
Alex Claudio
20 SV/3.88 ERA/1.37 WHP

THE SKIPPER

Jeff Banister

THE PAYOFF PITCH

What makes the Rangers worth watching is their crop of young hitters. Nomar Mazara is 22. Joey Gallo and Rougned Odor are 24. Delino DeShields is 25. To that collection they added 23-year-old **Willie Calhoun** from the Dodgers in the Yu Darvish trade. Calhoun, just 5' 8" and 187 pounds, has raked at every level of the minors, rocketing from the fourth round of the draft to the majors in just over two years. Despite his size, he has hit for power (.520 SLG in the minors) and has exceptional contact skills to match [a 18.9% strikeout rate]. The only concern is defense: With Odor at second, Texas is trying him in leftfield, where he is such a project that he'll start the year at Triple A to improve his glove work. Baseball always has a place for hitters, though, and Calhoun is going to be a great hitter.



A's



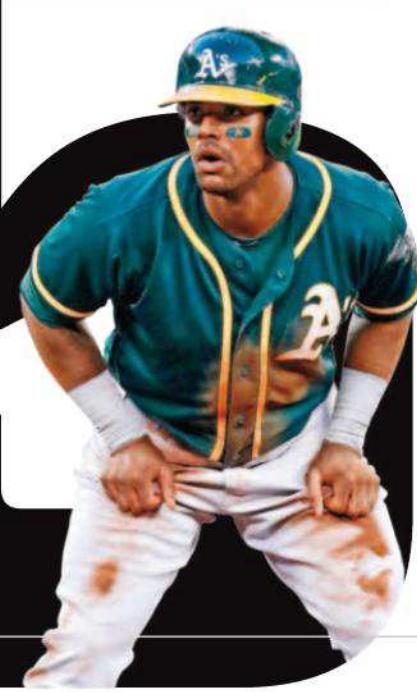
ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP OAKLAND

If the A's are .500, that's a great year because it means they're seeing progress. . . . The expectation level was pretty high coming into spring due to the early success of **Matt Olson** and **Matt Chapman** last year. They were talking about putting the C on Chapman's chest; he's everything they want as a representative of the organization. He still has work to do with the bat, but he's in that group of elite defensive third basemen. . . . Olson's swing is unorthodox, but he can flick the bat quickly through the zone and could emerge as a big bopper to complement **Khris Davis**. . . . One of the big questions is who is going to play centerfield, **Jorge Mateo** or **Dustin Fowler**. Fowler injured his knee last year, but it doesn't look as if he has a limp. If he's their everyday guy in center, they have to be excited about the offense. . . . Starting pitching is the big concern. They have a lot of kids trying to prove themselves in the bigs. It'll be hard for **Kendall Graveman** to lose the No. 1 job. **Sean Manaea** is a strong lefty, but he's inconsistent. If it were me, I'd start [6' 7", 22-year-old lefty] **A.J. Puk** on Opening Night [the A's sent Puk, their No. 1 prospect, to minor league camp on March 18]. . . . **Jed Lowrie** had a great year and can contribute to a winning team, but if they struggle, they should play **Franklin Barreto** at short. He can really rake.

OVER / UNDER

The A's have something good going with their young corner infielders, but they are still another wave of prospects away from a real run at respectability.



→ THE LINEUP

1. SHORTSTOP Marcus Semien .252 BA/.21 HR/11 SB
2. LEFTFIELD Matt Joyce .236 BA/.428 SLG/18 HR
3. SECOND BASE Jed Lowrie .261 BA/.402 SLG/11 HR
4. DH Khris Davis .249 BA/.505 SLG/36 HR

FANTASY BREAKOUT

5. FIRST BASE Matt Olson .236 BA/.478 SLG/32 HR



The 23-year-old mashed 24 homers in 59 games last year as a rookie. His power is real.

6. RIGHTFIELD Stephen Piscotty .254 BA/.17 HR/6 SB
7. THIRD BASE Matt Chapman .226 BA/.448 SLG/27 HR
8. CATCHER Jonathan Lucroy .273 BA/.11 HR/2 SB
9. CENTERFIELD Dustin Fowler .256 BA/.11 HR/14 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER Kendall Graveman 9 W/4.77 ERA/1.44 WHP
2. LH STARTER Sean Manaea 9 W/4.43 ERA/1.36 WHP
3. RH STARTER Paul Blackburn 4 W/4.95 ERA/1.49 WHP
4. RH STARTER Daniel Mengden 7 W/4.83 ERA/1.43 WHP

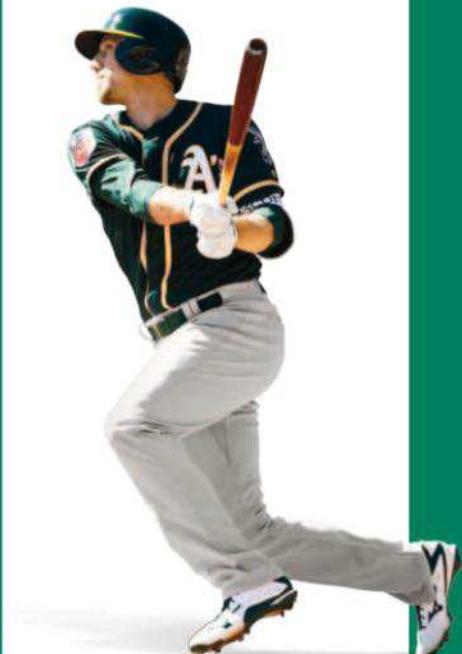
CLOSER
Blake Treinen
22 SV/3.74 ERA/8.7 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Bob Melvin

THE PAYOFF PITCH

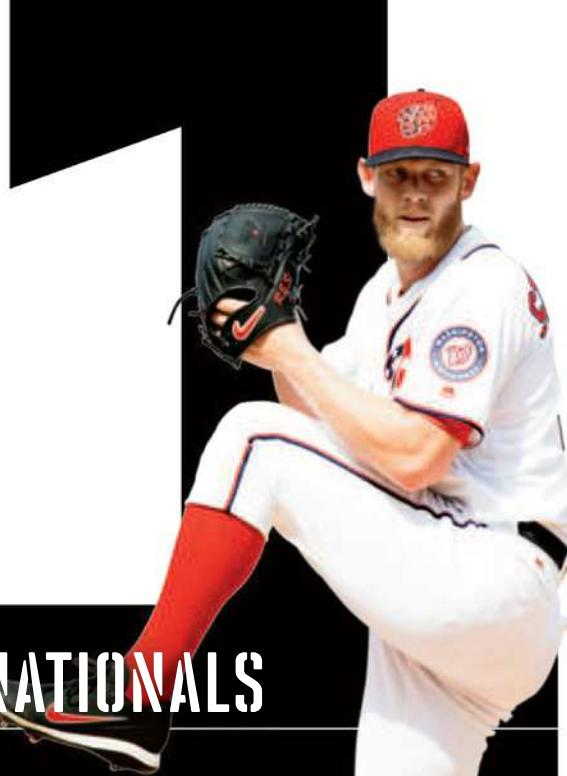
When the A's landed Cardinals outfielder **Stephen Piscotty** in December for two minor leaguers, the hook was that he would be coming home to the Bay Area, where his mother is fighting ALS. But the trade wasn't just for the benefit of Piscotty's family. In taking advantage of the outfield logjam in St. Louis, Oakland added a hitter who has shown power (22 homers in 2016), plate discipline (13% walk rate in '17) and the ability to hit for average (.305 in '15) . . . just never in the same season. In addition to being far from home after his mother received her diagnosis last May, Piscotty was mishandled by manager Mike Matheny and should have gotten more at bats. Now closer to his mom and assured of playing every day, the 27-year-old Piscotty will emerge as a star.



75



Trea Turner



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP WASHINGTON

If they're healthy, this is the best team in the league. But their window is closing fast. . . . Every time I see **Trea Turner**, I just can't believe they got him from San Diego and the best player they gave up was Steven Souza. Sure, Souza is a nice player, but Turner is a game-changer with his speed; a perennial All-Star. . . . It's clear that **Bryce Harper** wants to be the first \$40 million guy. He's figured out controlled violence at the plate, but on the bases and in the outfield he puts himself in harm's way too often. They have to tell him to back off a bit because the only thing between him and that \$40 million on the free-agent market might be health. . . . Your life depends on it, who do you want starting a game? It's **Max Scherzer**. I take him over Kershaw because he's been money in the postseason—and you can also lock him in for 200 innings. **Stephen Strasburg** is not far behind. His NLDS start against the Cubs last year could have been a turning point for him—going out there and seeing that you don't have to be at 110% to dominate. . . . The bullpen is deep—they have three guys who have closed elsewhere. But if there's a proven closer available at the deadline, they should make a move; you can't have enough relief help in October. **Sean Doolittle** is a shutdown reliever—but I also think he's best as a setup man.

OVER / UNDER

They won 97 games in 2017, and in what could be the worst division in baseball, they're a strong bet to own the best record in the majors.

09.5

→ THE LINEUP

- LEFTFIELD**
Adam Eaton
.364 OBP/11 HR/14 SB
- SHORTSTOP**
Trea Turner
.338 OBP/16 HR/46 SB
- RIGHTFIELD**
Bryce Harper
.413 OBP/.577 SLG/35 HR
- THIRD BASE**
Anthony Rendon
.370 OBP/21 HR/9 SB
- SECOND BASE**
Daniel Murphy
.307 BA/17 HR/4 SB

- CENTERFIELD**
Michael Taylor
.244 BA/17 HR/21 SB


A 20-20 threat with one of the league's top offenses around him, the 26-year-old could put up big numbers.

- FIRST BASE**
Ryan Zimmerman
.267 BA/.486 SLG/24 HR
- CATCHER**
Matt Wieters
.249 BA/10 HR/1 SB

→ THE STAFF

- RH STARTER**
Max Scherzer
15 W/3.39 ERA/11.2 K9
- RH STARTER**
Stephen Strasburg
14 W/3.44 ERA/10.3 K9
- LH STARTER**
Gio González
12 W/4.16 ERA/1.37 WHP
- RH STARTER**
Tanner Roark
11 W/4.32 ERA/1.37 WHP

CLOSER
Sean Doolittle
22 SV/3.32 ERA/10.9 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Dave Martinez

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Nationals' 2017 season ended too soon—again. Most critics, however, forgot how shorthanded the team was by the end. Bryce Harper was playing on a bad knee. Max Scherzer had a strained hamstring. And the starting centerfielder was long gone. **Adam Eaton** was a godsend for the Nats last April, with a .393 OBP in 23 games. The team scored 144 runs in his 23 starts (6.3 per game). Eaton blew out his left knee running to first on April 28, and the offense was never quite the same (4.9 runs per game). Eaton is still working his way back from surgery, but he should be ready to take over from Jayson Werth in leftfield by Opening Day. Eaton's line-drive bat and plate discipline are just what is needed to take Washington's offense from good to great.





METS



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP NEW YORK

If the rotation is healthy, they're a World Series contender. There's not much of a gap between them and the Nationals. . . . I'm not saying he's ever going to come all the way back, but **Matt Harvey** has shown flashes; his velocity was ticking back up in the mid-90s, and it seems to a lot of people that he's straightened things out. He needs to find his release point in his breaking ball—and stay out of the tabloids. If he's three-fourths of what he was, that's good enough in a rotation with **Noah Syndergaard** and **Jacob deGrom**. . . . With all the big lefty hitters in the division, **Steven Matz** needs to solidify his place in the rotation to balance out the righthanders. . . . Look, **Adrián González** is a pro, but the ceiling for him is being a good platoon player. . . . As **Yoenis Céspedes** goes, so goes the office. . . . With David Wright out, **Todd Frazier** has quickly emerged as the veteran leader; he instantly becomes a favorite in every clubhouse he steps inside. Now, if he can hit above .250, they'll like him even more. . . . **Jay Bruce** clearly wasn't comfortable with the New York media, but the dynamic got better through the year. **Brandon Nimmo**, though, is the really intriguing guy in the outfield. The former first-rounder has always been a gap-to-gap guy, but now he's flashing some power. He has upside. This is a sneaky-good offense to go with that pitching staff.

OVER / UNDER

With full seasons from a healthy Céspedes and Syndergaard, this team, which won 70 in '17, could improve by as much as 20 games this year.

81

THE LINEUP

1. SECOND BASE **Asdrúbal Cabrera**
.325 OBP/16 HR/4 SB
2. LEFTFIELD **Yoenis Céspedes**
.507 SLG/29 HR/3 SB
3. RIGHTFIELD **Jay Bruce**
.468 SLG/26 HR/4 SB

FANTASY BREAKOUT

4. SHORTSTOP **Amed Rosario**
.256 BA/8 HR/15 SB



His speed makes him a fantasy asset. The bat may be lagging, but his glove will keep him in the lineup.

5. THIRD BASE **Todd Frazier**
.236 BA/26 HR/9 SB
6. FIRST BASE **Adrián González**
.259 BA/.420 SLG/10 HR
7. CATCHER **Travis d'Arnaud**
.256 BA/.430 SLG/12 HR
8. CENTERFIELD **Juan Lagares**
.253 BA/4 HR/4 SB

THE STAFF

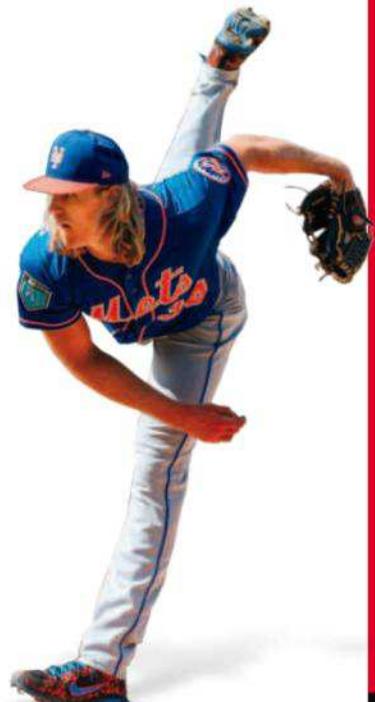
1. RH STARTER **Jacob deGrom**
13 W/3.45 ERA/1.16 WHP
2. RH STARTER **Noah Syndergaard**
13 W/3.11 ERA/1.08 WHP
3. LH STARTER **Jason Vargas**
9 W/4.46 ERA/1.35 WHP
4. RH STARTER **Matt Harvey**
7 W/4.72 ERA/1.40 WHP

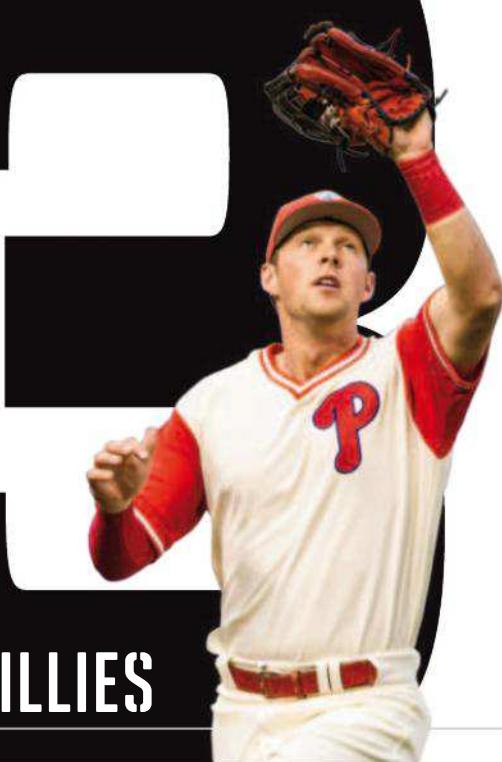
CLOSER
Jeury Familia
33 SV/3.60 ERA/9.0 K9

- **THE SKIPPER**
Mickey Callaway

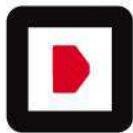
THE PAYOFF PITCH

For all the additions the Mets made to shore up their offense and defense, this remains a squad that will live and die by its rotation. No player is more important than **Noah Syndergaard**. Thor, the single most exciting pitcher in baseball, threw just 30 innings last year, missing most of the season with a torn lat muscle. Syndergaard announced his return with authority, topping 100 mph on half his pitches in his spring debut, but therein lies the problem: Can the 25-year-old not only deliver heat at the top of his range but also feather the throttle enough to make 32 starts and pitch the 200 innings the Mets desperately need? Finding the balance between dominance and endurance will be essential for Thor's career and for the Mets' playoff hopes.





PHILLIES



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP THE PHILLIES

Sizing up this team is like looking at a puzzle and seeing promising pieces but wondering how they all fit together. . . . There's good young talent here, with guys like **Rhys Hoskins**. Former managers Ryne Sandberg and Pete Mackanin got all their gray hairs from watching **Maikel Franco** and **Odúbel Herrera**. A few years ago we were putting Franco in the category of Arenado, Bryant and Machado at third base. Now he's not even in the same universe. His body isn't in as good shape as when he first came up, and he's lost all patience at the plate. Herrera is so streaky—one night he gives away four at bats, the next he goes 4 for 4. Those two guys are key, but I'm losing hope. . . . **Aaron Nola** is on the cusp of becoming an elite starter. After that, they're in trouble. **Vince Velasquez** is the wild card. If he's healthy, he's a top-of-the-rotation guy, but based on his track record, there's no reason to believe he can make it through the season. **Mark Leiter Jr.** reminds me of his dad—he knows how to pitch, and as bad as these guys are, he'll pitch his way into the rotation this year. . . . **Gabe Kapler** is progressive, and it's a nicer, friendlier vibe: There's dancing in the clubhouse, and the bench looks like a college football sideline. It could all work with a young team.

OVER / UNDER

The **Phillies** are a chic playoff pick, but their rotation is thin, and the offense, even with additions **Carlos Santana** and **J.P. Crawford**, still has holes.

75.5

→ THE LINEUP

1. SECOND BASE

César Hernández

.351 OBP/8 HR/16 SB

2. FIRST BASE

Carlos Santana

.371 OBP/27 HR/6 SB

3. THIRD BASE

Maikel Franco

.265 BA/.474 SLG/25 HR

FANTASY BREAKOUT



He's fallen short of expectations but makes a ton of contact, has hit 24 homers two straight years and is still just 25.

4. CENTERFIELD

Odúbel Herrera

.274 BA/15 HR/15 SB

5. LEFTFIELD

Rhys Hoskins

.527 SLG/36 HR/5 SB

6. RIGHTFIELD

Nick Williams

.252 BA/17 HR/6 SB

7. SHORTSTOP

J.P. Crawford

.238 BA/11 HR/7 SB

8. CATCHER

Jorge Alfaro

.232 BA/.385 SLG/11 HR

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER

Jake Arrieta

10 W/4.13 ERA/1.29 WHP

2. RH STARTER

Aaron Nola

11 W/3.76 ERA/1.21 WHP

3. RH STARTER

Jerad Eickhoff

8 W/4.94 ERA/1.37 WHP

4. RH STARTER

Vince Velasquez

6 W/4.67 ERA/1.37 WHP

CLOSER

Héctor Neris

21 SV/4.15 ERA/10.1 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Gabe Kapler

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The signing of Jake Arrieta on March 12 was a boost for a starting rotation that looked like the Phillies' weak link when camps opened. With the 32-year-old righthander now the nominal No. 1, it allows **Aaron Nola**, 24, to continue his development without that high-pressure label. Nola, the seventh pick in the 2014 draft, took a big step forward last season by finding an extra tick on his four-seam fastball (from 91–92 mph to almost 93). He also used that more, and his two-seamer less. Nola's curve, though, is his calling card: He throws it 30% of the time, and the league hit .172 off it last year. Following some early-season bumps Nola had a 3.18 ERA and a 28% strikeout rate after June 1. He's as good a bet as any player to be the Phillies' All-Star this year.



BRAVES



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP ATLANTA

Their ace is going to be **Julio Teheran** for now. Not for long. They've got a couple of guys who will pass him in time. He's a No. 2 or a 3 on a good team, and they're getting there. . . . The bullpen is typical Atlanta: hard throwers with command issues. What [ex-president] John Hart did was go out and acquire the best arms and hope the team could teach them how to pitch. . . . They're fortunate for a building team: They have two great veteran catchers in **Tyler Flowers** and **Kurt Suzuki**, who handles pitchers as well as anybody. Even though Flowers has more power, Suzuki has more game power, because he can set pitchers up. He had 19 home runs last year, and he knew what pitches were coming for all of them. . . . People are really excited about **Ozzie Albies**. He's a future All-Star. He makes good contact, he can run, and his energy level is great. . . . **Dansby Swanson** hasn't made any offensive strides at all. I don't know if it's strength or pitch selectivity, but something's missing. He can play defense, but will he ever be an elite shortstop? I don't think so. . . . **Ender Inciarte** and **Nick Markakis** have two of the most accurate arms. They hit the cutoff man, get rid of the ball quick, throw guys out. By the second half of the year, their outfield is going to be one of the most productive in the big leagues.

OVER / UNDER

This isn't a playoff team, but it also isn't a hopeless team. Freddie Freeman is a star, and Ozzie Albies and Ronald Acuña will bolster the offense.

24.5



→ THE LINEUP

1. SECOND BASE

Ozzie Albies

.322 OBP/12 HR/24 SB



Let the José Altuve comparisons begin. The 5'9" Albies hits for high average, has big-time speed and has flashed surprising power.

FANTASY BREAKOUT

2. FIRST BASE

Freddie Freeman

.291 BA/30 HR/7 SB

3. CATCHER

Tyler Flowers

.250 BA/.415 SLG/11 HR

4. RIGHTFIELD

Nick Markakis

.267 BA/10 HR/1 SB

5. LEFTFIELD

Lane Adams

.232 BA/5 HR/10 SB

6. CENTERFIELD

Ender Inciarte

.288 BA/9 HR/22 SB

7. THIRD BASE

Johan Camargo

.271 BA/.398 SLG/8 HR

8. SHORTSTOP

Dansby Swanson

.255 BA/9 HR/5 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER

Julio Teheran

9 W/4.83 ERA/1.37 WHP

2. RH STARTER

Mike Foltynewicz

8 W/4.68 ERA/1.38 WHP

3. LH STARTER

Sean Newcomb

9 W/4.24 ERA/1.46 WHP

4. RH STARTER

Brandon McCarthy

9 W/4.44 ERA/1.37 WHP

CLOSER

Arodys Vizcaino

23 SV/3.74 ERA/10.4 K9

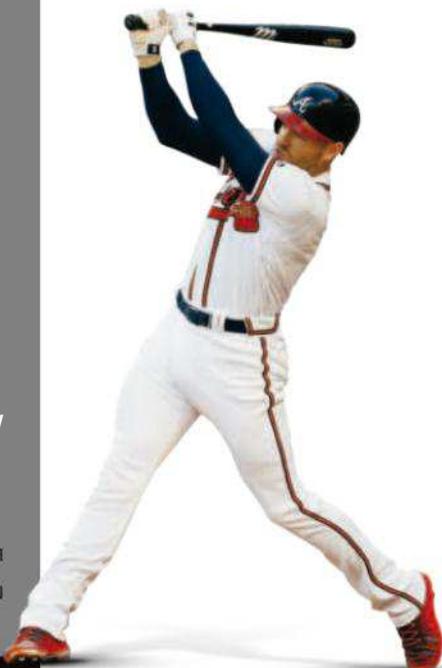
→ THE SKIPPER

Brian Snitker

THE PAYOFF PITCH

Most of the attention for the Braves this year will be focused on rookies Ronald Acuña [outfield] and Ozzie Albies [second base], who will lead a wave of young talent that could have Atlanta pushing for an NL East title in 2019. But the infusion of youth shouldn't distract from the Braves' MVP candidate,

Freddie Freeman. Freeman, 28, was sixth in NL MVP voting two years ago and was on his way to a career year last May when he was hit by a pitch on his left wrist. That cost him seven weeks and a lot of his power. The first baseman still set career highs in OBP (.403) and slugging (.586), and mashed 28 homers in just 117 games. Using OPS+, Freeman has been the fourth-best hitter in baseball over the last two seasons. He has the potential to lead the Braves to a surprising finish.





MARLINS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP MIAMI

What's the plan there? You got me. They're not going to be as bad as everyone thinks—but they're going to be bad. . . . **J.T. Realmuto** is the one golden piece that they have left right now. His power is increasing, and the guy steals bases too. You look at catcher depth in the league, it hasn't been this thin in years; he could be a very valuable piece on a contender. . . . One of the blessings of the fire sale is that we'll finally see what guys like **Derek Dietrich** can do. When **Martín Prado** got hurt last year, he got a chance and showed he could be an everyday player. He puts together good at bats and can beat you with the long ball. . . . The rap on **Justin Bour** is that he's a one-dimensional home run guy, but he quietly made adjustments on lefties and showed he can hit for average. He could attract some interest in the trade market. . . . Either **Dan Straily** or **José Ureña** is the ace. Ureña is learning that you can't get by with just your fastball and seems to be starting to understand what it takes to fill the strike zone. . . . **Justin Nicolino** has ticked up in velocity. He could be a pleasant surprise. . . . For years they've been thinking **Kyle Barraclough** will be their closer, and he took a step in the right direction last year, but he's still way too inconsistent. Unless he cuts down on his walks, I just don't see it.

OVER / UNDER

The **Giants** had the most losses in the NL [98] last year, and that's a lot, but it's likely that Miami—the league's worst team—will drop at least that many.

4.5

→ THE LINEUP

1. RIGHTFIELD Cameron Maybin
.327 OBP/6 HR/16 SB

2. CATCHER J.T. Realmuto

.273 BA/14 HR/7 SB



The rare Marlin with fantasy relevance, Realmuto showed pop to go with a good average.

3. SECOND BASE Starlin Castro

.272 BA/.423 SLG/16 HR

4. FIRST BASE Justin Bour

.264 BA/.478 SLG/25 HR

5. THIRD BASE Martín Prado

.273 BA/.397 SLG/7 HR

6. LEFTFIELD Derek Dietrich

.251 BA/.420 SLG/10 HR

7. CENTERFIELD Lewis Brinson

.254 BA/9 HR/7 SB

8. SHORTSTOP Miguel Rojas

.264 BA/2 HR/2 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER José Ureña

8 W/4.90 ERA/1.47 WHIP

2. RH STARTER Dan Straily

9 W/4.59 ERA/1.33 WHIP

3. RH STARTER Adam Conley

2 W/5.11 ERA/1.48 WHIP

4. LH STARTER Dillon Peters

2 W/3.93 ERA/1.36 WHIP

CLOSER Brad Ziegler

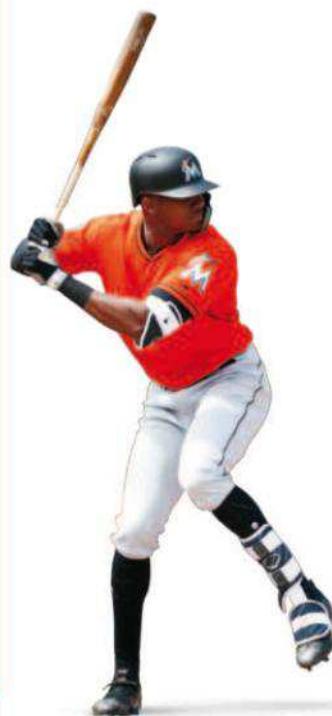
25 SV/3.88 ERA/6.0 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Don Mattingly

THE PAYOFF PITCH

It's certainly hard to sell the 2018 Marlins to anyone, much less to a fan base that spent last year watching the best outfield in baseball and Giancarlo Stanton's run at 60 home runs. The best player the Marlins got back in any of their deals was centerfielder **Lewis Brinson**. Acquired from Milwaukee in the Christian Yelich deal, Brinson, 24 in May, has been a rated prospect for three years in the Rangers, Brewers and now Marlins systems. He's shown good power and speed, with the primary concern being his bat-to-ball skills: a 26% strikeout rate in the minors that jumped to 31% in a brief, unsuccessful call-up with the Brewers. At worst, Brinson should be an entertaining centerfielder with good defensive skills, the best—maybe only—reason to watch the Fish.



Yu Darvish



CUBS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP CHICAGO

Kyle Hendricks's velocity is back in the upper 80s, which is huge for him. His best pitch is the changeup, which sits at 80. Last year his fastball and changeup got too close together. . . . **Yu Darvish** was definitely tipping pitches in the World Series but they'll get it fixed. He's safer than Jake Arrieta and has bigger upside. . . . **Anthony Rizzo** is daring you to pitch inside and he takes the outer half away from a lot of pitchers, but he gets hit a lot. I'm surprised he hasn't been hurt more. . . . You gotta be aware of **Willson Contreras**, with his back-pick ability. This guy was a third baseman in the minors! They didn't think his bat was going to hold up and it just took off when he went behind the plate. . . . A trimmed down **Kyle Schwarber** is definitely moving better. Everybody talks about how bad he is in the outfield, but he tracks the ball pretty well and he's got an average arm. He's not bad in leftfield. . . . **Javy Baez** is probably the most gifted player defensively I've seen. At the plate, if you spin the breaking ball down and away, he pulls off a lot of balls. But he doesn't miss a lot of mistakes. If he had a little more plate discipline, he'd be an MVP candidate. . . . **Addison Russell** is an upright hitter, so there are holes down and away. They've incorporated a leg kick to try to get him to use his lower half more and tap into his power.

OVER / UNDER

The young core that has played in three straight NLCS remains intact—and they added the offseason's best available pitcher, Yu Darvish.

04.5



→ THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD

Ian Happ

.252 BA/25 HR/11 SB



He had 24 homers as a rookie. His versatility—he also plays second—makes him even more valuable.

2. THIRD BASE

Kris Bryant

.352 SLG/33 HR/10 SB

3. FIRST BASE

Anthony Rizzo

.540 SLG/33 HR/10 SB

4. CATCHER

Willson Contreras

.268 BA/19 HR/5 SB

5. LEFTFIELD

Kyle Schwarber

.490 SLG/28 HR/2 SB

6. SHORTSTOP

Addison Russell

.441 SLG/18 HR/4 SB

7. RIGHTFIELD

Jason Heyward

.265 BA/12 HR/10 SB

8. SECOND BASE

Javier Baez

.258 BA/22 HR/12 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. LH STARTER

Jon Lester

13 W/3.92 ERA/1.26 WHP

2. RH STARTER

Yu Darvish

12 W/3.63 ERA/10.4 K9

3. LH STARTER

José Quintana

14 W/3.49/1.20 WHP

4. RH STARTER

Kyle Hendricks

11 W/4.03 ERA/1.29 WHP

CLOSER

Brandon Morrow

36 SV/3.60 ERA/9.4 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Joe Maddon

THE PAYOFF PITCH

After three straight playoff trips and a long-awaited World Series win, Cubs fans don't need much reason to get excited these days. If they do, though, they can think about this: Not only do they have one of the best teams in baseball, they have one of the youngest. The Cubs' Opening Day lineup will likely not have a single player older than 29, and of the 13 position players on that day's roster, just two will be in their 30s. That's similar to the rebuilding Padres, who have one thirtysomething in the lineup. The Cubs control all that talent through 2021, save Jason Heyward, who can opt out of his deal after the season. Buy that replica jersey; tell your daughter to pick a favorite player, like **Kris Bryant**; make a season-ticket deposit for '21. This core is going to be together, winning games, for a while.





BREWERS



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP MILWAUKEE

I think they surprised even themselves with how good they were last year, but with the moves they made, they should be even better. . . . Coming from Korea, there wasn't much of a scouting report on **Eric Thames**, so after he got off to the hot start, guys started figuring out how to pitch him. It's possible he just had one good month. Now he might just be a platoon guy at first. . . . **Ryan Braun** doesn't have the same bat speed, but the thing he still does better than 95% of guys is he really stays on pitches. . . . Getting out of Boston did wonders for **Travis Shaw**. With no pressure of anyone taking his job, he relaxed, and I don't see any reason why he'd fall off. . . . **Lorenzo Cain** was a great signing: a cornerstone in centerfield. To add another difference maker in **Christian Yelich** was huge: They improved more than anyone else in the league. . . . Throwing strikes was always an issue for **Corey Knebel**, but that changed last year. His curveball is double-plus, and he throws 100 off of that. He's potentially elite. . . . **Chase Anderson** is the No. 1 but in a playoff rotation he's a No. 3. And if you're running **Zach Davies**, who's at best a No. 4 starter, as your No. 2, you don't love their playoff chances. A front of the rotation starter is the finishing piece to make them a legit postseason contender.

OVER / UNDER

The improved offense will win a lot of games, but it's hard to make the postseason with a rotation that calls Chase Anderson your ace.

94.5

→ THE LINEUP

1. LEFTFIELD Christian Yelich .376 OBP/22 HR/16 SB
2. CENTERFIELD Lorenzo Cain .283 BA/16 HR/22 SB
3. THIRD BASE Travis Shaw .458 SLG/26 HR/7 SB
4. FIRST BASE Ryan Braun .496 SLG/21 HR/12 SB
5. RIGHTFIELD Domingo Santana .258 BA/26 HR/10 SB
6. CATCHER Manny Piña .249 BA/6 HR/2 SB
7. SHORTSTOP Orlando Arcia .259 BA/15 HR/16 SB
8. SECOND BASE Jonathan Villar .247 BA/13 HR/34 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER Zach Davies 9 W/4.71 ERA/1.42 WHP

FANTASY BREAKOUT

2. RH STARTER Chase Anderson 9 W/4.78 ERA/1.35 WHP



Milwaukee's ace while Jimmy Nelson is on the DL, Anderson had a 1.94 ERA and 0.90 WHP in his final 16 starts.

3. RH STARTER Jhoulys Chacín 8 W/4.60 ERA/1.43 WHP

4. LH STARTER Brent Suter 6 W/4.67 ERA/1.38 WHP

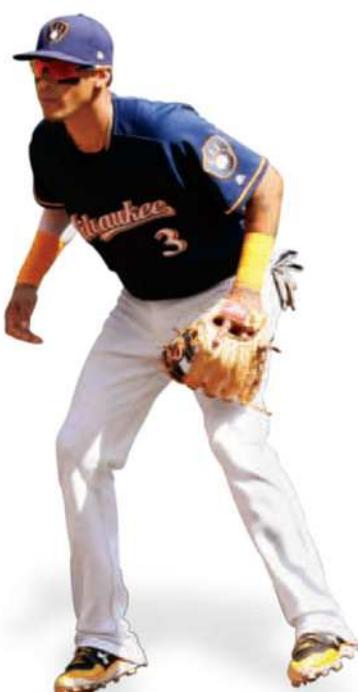
CLOSER
Corey Knebel
30 SV/3.18 ERA/12.9 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Craig Counsell

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Brewers were one of the few teams to aggressively tap the open market, trading for Christian Yelich and signing Lorenzo Cain on back-to-back days in February. They now have enviable outfield depth with holdovers Ryan Braun and Domingo Santana in that mix, with Braun working out at first base this spring to escape the logjam. The next Brewers star, though, already plays on the dirt. Shortstop **Orlando Arcia**, 23, followed up a shaky 2016 debut by improving his contact hitting, power and defense. He hit 15 homers and stole 14 bases, while leading NL shortstops in chances and double plays. Arcia's durability, defense and position made him almost twice as valuable to the Brewers as Eric Thames and his 31 homers were in '17. Baseball is lousy with great young shortstops; Arcia will move into that conversation this summer.



CARDINALS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP ST. LOUIS

This is a potentially explosive offense. Hitting cleanup behind a bunch of guys who are good at getting on base, **Marcell Ozuna** is going to shine. Last year he was in unbelievable shape and went to another level. He's a 35-home-run guy and his defense and speed are underrated.... The Cardinals clearly weren't sure what they had in **Tommy Pham**. Don't kid yourself, he's a quality big league player—he cut down his strikeouts and was their best all-around player last year. A classic case of a guy who never got an opportunity.... **Paul DeJong** was an even bigger surprise. A guy like him hits 38 home runs between the big leagues and Triple A? Tell me that the baseballs aren't juiced.... **Carlos Martínez** struggled a bit down the stretch, but on half the teams in the league, he is a legit ace.... **Adam Wainwright** can still locate but his stuff is without question a notch down. **Miles Mikolas** is the wild card in the rotation coming over from Japan, where he put up great numbers—but we've seen guys coming from there who've struggled.... **Luke Gregerson** still has a good slider he can throw anytime, but they really need reliever **Brett Cecil** to have a better year. They'll be shopping for bullpen help at the trade deadline.... A lot will have to break right for them to stay with Chicago, but they'll be in the mix for a wild-card spot.

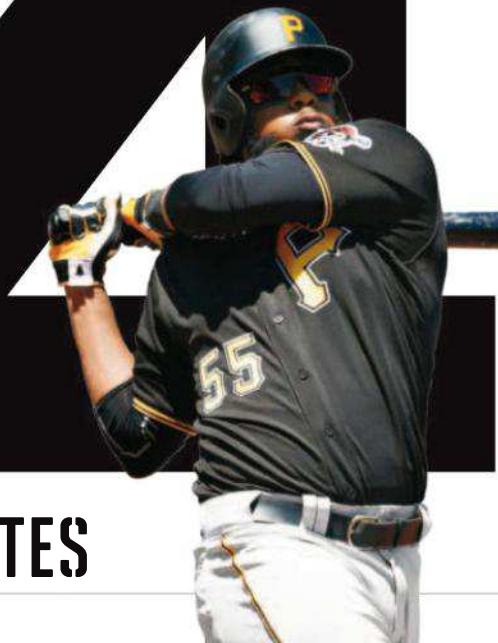
OVER / UNDER

The addition of Marcell Ozuna makes this a potent offense, but if Carlos Martínez and Luke Weaver underperform, the Cards will fall short of the playoffs.

OVER 95.5

UNDER 95.5

OVER 95.5



PIRATES



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP PITTSBURGH

The toughest job on the club isn't manager, it's pitching coach. The rotation's just a lot of fours and fives. **Tyler Glasnow** is in the mix and has easily got the best stuff, but he'll throw a great snappy fastball then come back with worst hanging breaking ball you ever saw.... **Corey Dickerson** is gonna hit; it's a good park for him. **Starling Marté** and **Gregory Polanco** can cover up for Dickerson's range. Those two get to everything.... Marté is a great athlete, but I thought he'd have more power than he's shown. Polanco is a top-shelf defender, and he's got speed. If those two don't hit home runs, the Pirates are in trouble. Well, they are anyway.... **Josh Harrison** is a valuable superutility guy, but he's not very happy. He wanted to get traded. I'll be shocked if he ends the season there.... **Josh Bell** is a DH playing first base. He doesn't have good hands, good range or good feet around the bag. Other than that, he's fine! ... If **Kevin Siegrist** can be a lefty late-inning reliever, that would be big, but he pitched about every day in St. Louis. How much is left in the arm? ... When Russell Martin left after 2014, the pitching staff went into a funk. He's that good defensively and he's a leader. But **Francisco Cervelli** is a good offensive catcher and the pitchers are more comfortable with him.

OVER / UNDER

Starling Marté, **Gregory Polanco** and **Jameson Taillon** could be the core of an eventual contender, but a sell-off is very likely to come this summer.

73

→ THE LINEUP

1. SECOND BASE

Josh Harrison

.324 OBP/11 HR/13 SB

2. LEFTFIELD

Corey Dickerson

.473 SLG/22 HR/3 SB

3. CENTERFIELD

Starling Marté

.282 BA/15 HR/28 SB

4. FIRST BASE

Josh Bell

.459 SLG/21 HR/3 SB

5. CATCHER

Francisco Cervelli

.259 BA/5 HR/1 SB

6. RIGHTFIELD

Gregory Polanco

.268 BA/18 HR/15 SB



Various injuries have held him back over the years, but a healthy Polanco still offers 20-20 potential.

7. THIRD BASE

Colin Moran

.259 BA/11 HR/1 SB

8. SHORTSTOP

Jordy Mercer

.261 BA/11 HR/1 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER

Jameson Taillon

11 W/3.95 ERA/1.28 WHP

2. RH STARTER

Iván Nova

9 W/4.47 ERA/1.35 WHP

3. RH STARTER

Joe Musgrove

9 W/4.06 ERA/1.29 WHP

4. RH STARTER

Chad Kuhl

9 W/4.42 ERA/1.39 WHP

CLOSER

Felipe Rivero

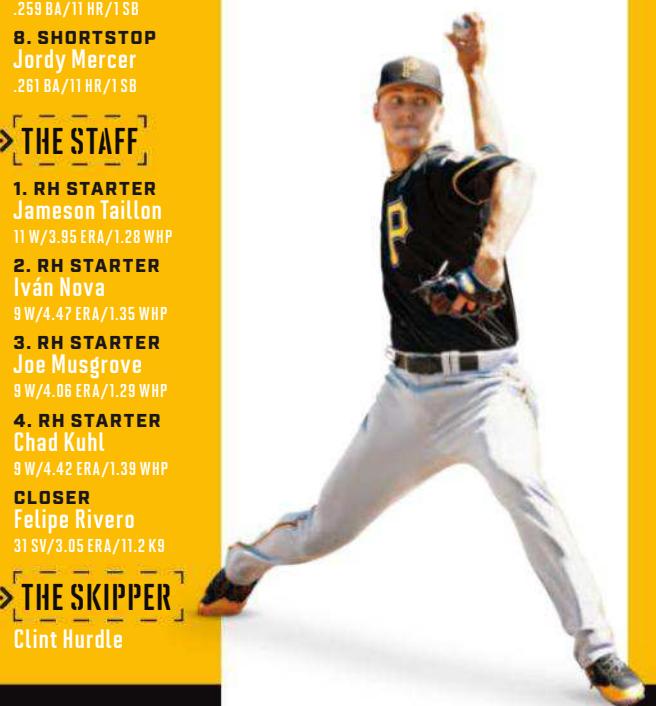
31 SV/3.05 ERA/11.2 K9

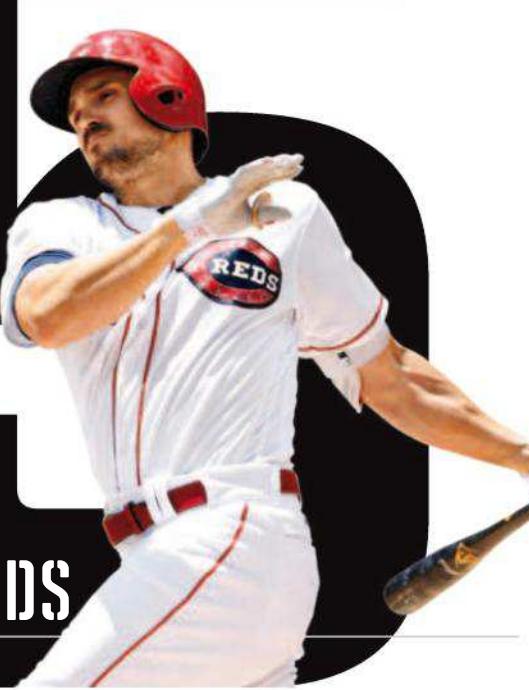
→ THE SKIPPER

Clint Hurdle

THE PAYOFF PITCH

Pirates fans no doubt felt burned this offseason, when the team traded away not only staff ace Gerrit Cole (to the Astros), but also the face of the franchise, Andrew McCutchen (who went to the Giants). Bringing fans back to PNC Park to support a team that projects to finish fourth in the NL Central won't be easy. Selling them on **Jameson Taillon** is a start. The No. 2 overall pick in 2010, Taillon returned from testicular cancer, diagnosed last May, to show flashes of the No. 1 starter he may become one day. He allowed no more than one run in nine of his 25 starts, no more than two runs in 16. Taillon struck out a solid 21.3% of the batters he faced, with 2.72 strikeouts for every walk. Now healthy, Taillon has the pedigree and the story to become the new fan favorite.





REDS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP CINCINNATI

There aren't a lot of middle-class teams in baseball, but they're one. They're young and they're talented, but there are a lot of *ifs*. . . . **Billy Hamilton** is such a good defensive player; he's got such a great arm. But defenses that shift on him take so many hits away because he doesn't have the ability to drive the ball. He has to bring the defense in by showing he can bunt. . . . **Adam Duvall** was much better versus lefthanded pitching last year. He's got a pretty aggressive approach and a good feel for the barrel, and he can keep progressing. . . . When I saw **Devin Mesoraco** in 2014, he was a monster, a middle-of-the-order bat at a premium position. He just can't stay healthy. Ideally for him, he goes to the AL because he can't catch every day. He could go to first base—just not in Cincinnati, because they have a pretty good one. . . . **Luis Castillo** has a tough fastball to square up, plus the changeup and a power sinker. The one thing that's gonna take him to the next level is command. . . . **Raisel Iglesias** has a huge fastball, 97 to 99, and he's cheap, so come second half when teams are looking for power arms, he's an interesting piece. He's also a guy you want to hold on to. . . . I could see them surprising people in the first half, but they're gonna have to monitor innings with their young pitchers, and I think they'll fall off.

THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES (BELL); ROBBIE ROGERS/MLB PHOTO/S/GETTY IMAGES (POLANCO); RONALD C. MODRA/SPORTS IMAGERY/GETTY IMAGES (TAUONI); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (DUVALL, VOTTO); ALEX TRAUTWIG/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (CASTILLO)

OVER / UNDER

Between **Joey Votto** and the young arms, there's enough talent to end their three-year run of last-place finishes, but they're still a few years from contending.

79 5

THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD **Billy Hamilton**
.300 OBP/.6 HR/46 SB
2. THIRD BASE **Eugenio Suárez**
.442 SLG/23 HR/7 SB
3. FIRST BASE **Joey Votto**
.432 OBP/.521 SLG/28 HR
4. SECOND BASE **Scooter Gennett**
.262 BA/17 HR/4 SB
5. LEFTFIELD **Adam Duvall**
.454 SLG/25 HR/5 SB
6. RIGHTFIELD **Scott Schebler**
.462 SLG/22 HR/7 SB
7. SHORTSTOP **José Peraza**
.280 BA/7 HR/22 SB
8. CATCHER **Tucker Barnhart**
.258 BA/7 HR/3 SB

THE STAFF

FANTASY BREAKOUT

1. RH STARTER
Luis Castillo
9 W/3.88 ERA/9.0 K9



With three plus pitches, the ace-in-the-making flashed a top ground ball rate and an elite repertoire in '17.

RH STARTER
Anthony DeSclafani
8 W/4.52 ERA/1.31 WHP

LH STARTER
Brandon Finnegan
6 W/4.67 ERA/1.46 WHP

RH STARTER
Homer Bailey
7 W/4.83 ERA/1.43 WHP

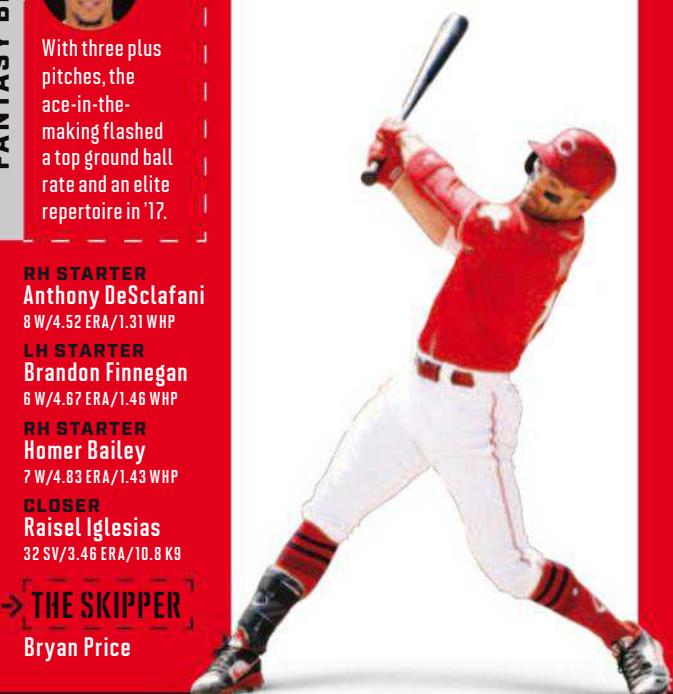
CLOSER
Raisel Iglesias
32 SV/3.46 ERA/10.8 K9

THE SKIPPER

Bryan Price

THE PAYOFF PITCH

If it's possible to be both two-thirds of the way to the Hall of Fame, and mostly anonymous outside of your city, **Joey Votto** pulls it off. Votto, 34, is just outside the all-time top 10 in on-base percentage, his .428 mark almost 20 points higher than that of any other active player. He played in all 162 games last year, leading the NL in OBP, walks and OPS, hitting 36 homers while striking out just 83 times. After just missing a second NL MVP award in 2017, Votto now has six top 10 finishes, including three top fives. He's even become a good percentage base stealer, swiping 24 bags in 29 tries over the last three years. That kind of continued development is a reason to pay close attention: What will Votto add to his game this year?



Cody Bellinger





DODGERS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP LOS ANGELES

Clayton Kershaw is the key. They need to get 200 innings from him. As long as he's Clayton Kershaw, they should be O.K. . . . Rich Hill is not a workhorse, but he looks healthy. He's really reinvented himself. . . . Walker Buehler could be like a trade-deadline acquisition when they bring him up, probably to add to the bullpen. He's got electric stuff, up to 100. He's got a plus curveball that's 20 miles an hour off his fastball. . . . Kenley Jansen is the best closer in the game, but you just worry about how much he's been used. . . . Will Chris Taylor hit 21 home runs again? I don't know, but he'll be disruptive on the bases. . . . There's a little concern with Corey Seager's elbow, but when he's on, he's an MVP candidate. . . . I expect another solid year from Justin Turner. He's the leader of the team. . . . Cody Bellinger got exposed a little in the World Series. His swing takes a big uppercut path, and Houston had a veteran staff that could exploit that. . . . Yasiel Puig has tools, but he's hard to trust. He can try to do too much at the plate. . . . You know who has had a great spring? Matt Kemp. If they want to platoon him with Joc Pederson, they could, and have Kiké Hernández as a late-inning defensive replacement. . . . Pederson has struggled in camp. He has a big swing, but he's got power and he's a solid defender.

OVER / UNDER

It's a lot to ask a team to get over 96 wins—again. Rich Hill, Alex Wood and Chris Taylor had career years in 2017. L.A. is the West favorite but not quite a 97-win team.



THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD

Chris Taylor

.327 OBP/13 HR/16 SB



In '17, his first full season, he was one of only nine to hit at least 21 homers with 17 steals; he still has room to grow.

2. SHORTSTOP

Corey Seager

.487 SLG/24 HR/4 SB

3. THIRD BASE

Justin Turner

.372 OBP/22 HR/4 SB

4. FIRST BASE

Cody Bellinger

.515 SLG/36 HR/10 SB

5. LEFTFIELD

Matt Kemp

.270 BA/.470 SLG/17 HR

6. RIGHTFIELD

Yasiel Puig

.501 SLG/24 HR/11 SB

7. CATCHER

Yasmani Grandal

.329 OBP/.442 SLG/13 HR

8. SECOND BASE

Logan Forsythe

.242 BA/10 HR/3 SB

THE STAFF

1. LH STARTER

Clayton Kershaw

15 W/2.74 ERA/10.3 K9

2. LH STARTER

Alex Wood

9 W/3.50 ERA/1.23 WHP

3. RH STARTER

Kenta Maeda

8 W/4.14 ERA/1.22 WHP

4. LH STARTER

Rich Hill

10 W/3.63 ERA/1.20 WHP

CLOSER

Kenley Jansen

38 SV/2.77 ERA/12.6 K9

THE SKIPPER

Dave Roberts

THE PAYOFF PITCH

Let's keep it simple: The Dodgers have the best pitcher on the planet, one of the best pitchers ever, and he builds orphans in his spare time. Clayton Kershaw, who in an off-year marred by back problems and a career-high home run rate, still led the NL in ERA (2.31) and finished second in Cy Young Award balloting. He's not just a stat generator, either; he is as watchable a pitcher as you'll find, with a high leg kick and a gorgeous 12-to-6 curve. His habit of berating himself for violations such as missing the corner by an inch or giving up a bloop single is charming too. Enjoy him now, Dodgers fans; Kershaw can opt out of his contract after the season and hit free agency, where he would almost surely become the game's first \$40 million pitcher.





D-BACKS



ENEMY LINES A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP ARIZONA

They're not in for a huge regression, but they will take a step back. . . . Even with a full season from **A.J. Pollock**, they're going to miss J.D. Martinez a lot. He took that offense to another level last summer. **Steven Souza** will help buffer that loss, but that's 40-homer production they're losing. . . . **Yasmany Tomas** has become a fifth outfielder. They would love to move him—he's owed a lot and their focus is to get more athletic and better defensively, and all he gives you is power. . . . Something clicked for **Ketel Marte**: He showed better discipline, a better approach, and he looks like he can be more than a defense-only guy. . . . **Zack Greinke** will never have the season he had in '15 again: His fastball has ticked back a couple miles per hour, but he's still got his smarts and a full arsenal. . . . There are question marks in the back of the rotation. **Patrick Corbin** nearly got back to his pre-Tommy John levels, but he struggles on the road, where his ERA was over 5.00. A change of scenery helped **Taijuan Walker**, but he has too many moving parts in his delivery. . . . I can't believe I'm saying it, but they're going to miss Fernando Rodney. The closer's role will be up for grabs all season. **Archie Bradley** has the most upside, but he's also better suited for multiple innings. If they fall short it will be because of the bullpen.

OVER / UNDER

95.5

Offense has long been the team's calling card, but it will be the trio of Zack Greinke, Robbie Ray and Taijuan Walker that pushes Arizona toward 90 wins.

→ THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD
A.J. Pollock
.287 BA/18 HR/22 SB

FANTASY BREAKOUT

2. SECOND BASE
Ketel Marte
.285 BA/8 HR/13 SB



Marte draws walks, steals bases and will score a ton of runs at the top of a high-powered offense.

3. LEFTFIELD
David Peralta
.280 BA/15 HR/7 SB

4. FIRST BASE
Paul Goldschmidt
.534 SLG/31 HR/18 SB

5. THIRD BASE
Jake Lamb
.254 BA/26 HR/5 SB

6. RIGHTFIELD
Steven Souza
.244 BA/20 HR/13 SB

7. CATCHER
Alex Avila
.227 BA/.353 OBP/10 HR

8. SHORTSTOP
Nick Ahmed
.238 BA/7 HR/7 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. RH STARTER
Zack Greinke
13 W/3.73 ERA/1.21 WHP

2. LH STARTER
Robbie Ray
12 W/3.54 ERA/1.24 WHP

3. RH STARTER
Taijuan Walker
11 W/4.44 ERA/1.35 WHP

4. LH STARTER
Patrick Corbin
9 W/4.15 ERA/1.36 WHP

CLOSER
Archie Bradley
26 SV/3.46 ERA/10.2 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Torey Lovullo

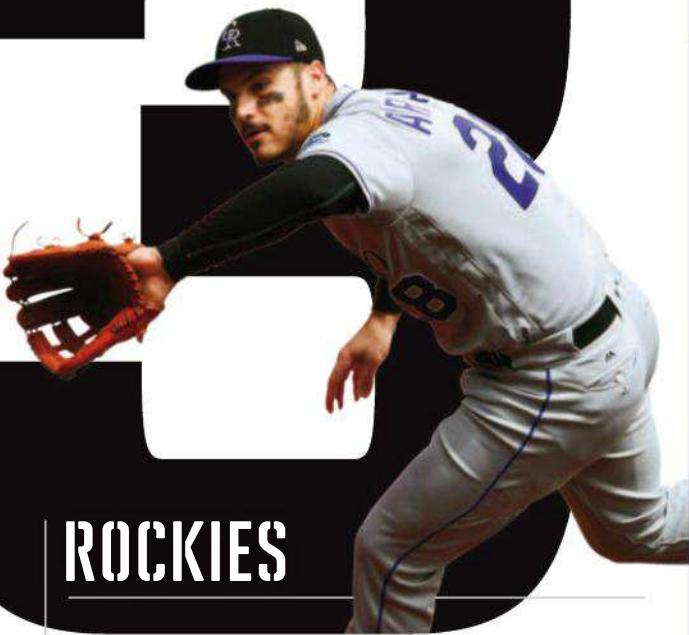
THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Diamondbacks' 2017 closer, Fernando Rodney, was allowed to leave for Minnesota, and that would seem to make **Archie Bradley** the closer . . . but hold on.

Torey Lovullo enjoyed having Bradley, who had a 1.73 ERA in his first full season out of the bullpen, as a multi-inning weapon. Lovullo's commitment to using his best reliever in the biggest spots was a key part of last year's 93-win campaign.

With Brad Boxberger (41 saves in '15) acquired from the Rays, and Yosh Hirano signed out of Japan (156 career saves), Lovullo could run back last year's model, with Bradley as the fireman and a lesser reliever protecting three-run leads with three outs to go. How Lovullo uses Bradley will be the thing to watch in the Arizona bullpen.





ROCKIES



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP COLORADO

No surprise: These guys will mash. **Charlie Blackmon** and **Nolan Arenado** are MVP candidates in their prime—but they're also both getting close to free agency, so the window is closing. If they're going to make a run at a championship, now's the time. . . . **Ryan McMahon** came back from Double A with a shortened stroke and started getting a feel for using the opposite field. He's not a 30-home-run guy, not even in that ballpark, but he'll hit for a high average. . . . **Trevor Story** has taken a step back since he broke through as a rookie. He sells out for power; his two-strike approach needs a lot of work. . . . There's talent in the pitching staff and the first time in a long time, there's depth too. . . . **Jon Gray** will emerge as a true No. 1 this season. He made big strides in repeating his delivery last year, and **Chris Iannetta** behind the plate will only help him. . . . **Chad Bettis**, coming back from cancer, was one of the best stories of last season, but he needs to increase his K-rate if he's going to thrive in Coors Field. . . . **German Márquez** is the guy to watch: On stuff alone, he's a No. 2 with his nasty hook. . . . They've made a concerted effort to strengthen the bullpen. Adding **Wade Davis** solidifies a strong unit: I think the formula will work. They'll be in the mix for a playoff spot.

OVER / UNDER

The rotation beyond Jon Gray poses a lot of questions, but the offense and the improved bullpen will get the Rockies over .500.

82

→ THE LINEUP

1. FIRST BASE
Ryan McMahon
.454 SLG/14 HR/10 SB
2. CENTERFIELD
Charlie Blackmon
.514 SLG/27 HR/14 SB
3. SECOND BASE
DJ LeMahieu
.371 OBP/10 HR/10 SB
4. THIRD BASE
Nolan Arenado
.296 BA/.577 SLG/.39 HR
5. SHORTSTOP
Trevor Story
.246 BA/26 HR/10 SB
6. RIGHTFIELD
Carlos Gonzalez
.259 BA/16 HR/3 SB
7. LEFTFIELD
Ian Desmond
.275 BA/19 HR/17 SB
8. CATCHER
Chris Iannetta
.247 BA/.444 SLG/10 HR

→ THE STAFF

FANTASY BREAKOUT

1. RH STARTER

Jon Gray

12 W/4.11 ERA/9.4 K9



Gray, who added a curveball that helps him against lefties, is ready to establish himself as a true ace.

2. RH STARTER

Tyler Anderson

9 W/4.40 ERA/1.35 WHP

3. RH STARTER

German Márquez

8 W/4.60 ERA/1.34 WHP

4. RH STARTER

Chad Bettis

8 W/5.22 ERA/1.50 WHP

CLOSER

Wade Davis

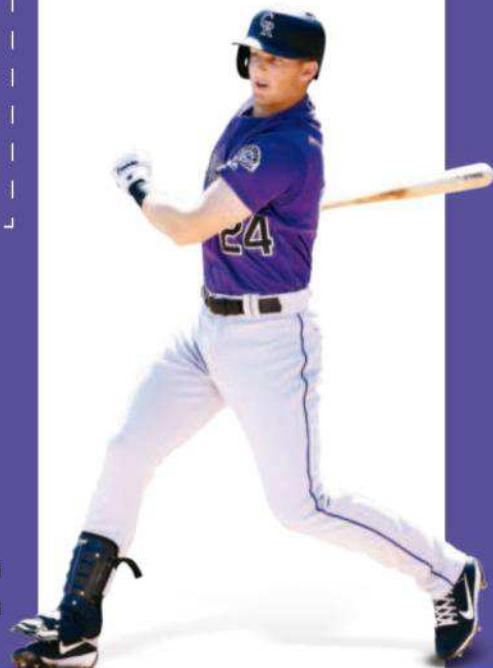
29 SV/3.74 ERA/10.2 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Bud Black

THE PAYOFF PITCH

The Rockies' conundrum is the same as always: How do you convince a team that led the league in runs that it actually has, once you account for the effects of its ballpark, a bad offense? The Rockies were 12th in the NL in wRC+ [Weighted Runs Created Plus], and 11th in OPS+, nerd stats that take the air out of 824 runs scored. GM Jeff Bridich focused on the bullpen this winter, so the offense will have to improve through those already in the organization. **Ryan McMahon**, a 23-year-old rookie, is the front-runner to win the first base job, after hitting a combined .355/.403/.583 at Double A and Triple A last year. He and veteran catcher **Chris Iannetta** are the only new blood, so if the Rockies are going to have a truly good offense, those two will have to hit.



GIANTS



ENEMY LINES

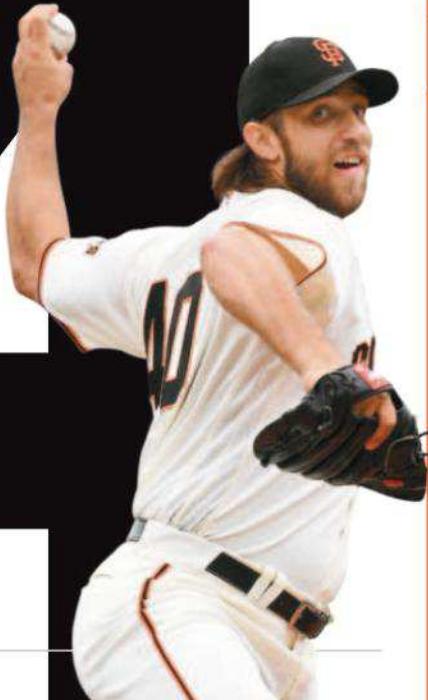
A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP SAN FRANCISCO

Nobody is scared of the Giants anymore. . . . They don't have a legit centerfielder. If **Austin Jackson** is starting on Opening Day, that's a problem. . . . I'm not sure this is the right park for **Andrew McCutchen**. I could see him getting traded at the deadline. And **Hunter Pence**? They've gotten everything out of him that they possibly can. . . . I have no idea how this pitching staff is going to sort itself out. **Madison Bumgarner** is healthy, but he's got some mileage on him. **Johnny Cueto** has been injured and looked like he stopped having fun last year. . . . There is a lot of concern in the bullpen. **Mark Melancon** was supposed to be the finishing touch, and he was a disappointment. After that, it's no-name guys with no real success in the big leagues. You don't win a playoff game because of **Tony Watson**. . . . **Evan Longoria** can just hit. He's got a great swing, is not afraid to hit the ball the other way, a smart hitter. It's too bad he spent his career in Tampa; if he had played for a big-market team he'd be considered a Hall of Fame guy. . . . They damn near killed **Bruce Bochy** last year with their terrible defense. **Pablo Sandoval**? I like the guy but come on. . . . They almost lost 100 last year. What's to make me say the Giants will be better? A healthy Bumgarner? They're a middle-of-the-pack team at best.

OVER / UNDER

Andrew McCutchen and **Evan Longoria** aren't the game-changers they once were. After winning just .64, jumping .500 is a massive leap for a crumbling roster.

015



→ THE LINEUP

1. **RIGHTFIELD**
Andrew McCutchen
.363 OBP/24 HR/11 SB
2. **SECOND BASE**
Joe Panik
.284 BA/11 HR/4 SB
3. **CATCHER**
Buster Posey
.372 OBP/15 HR/5 SB
4. **THIRD BASE**
Evan Longoria
.271 BA/.460 SLG/23 HR
5. **FIRST BASE**
Brandon Belt
.260 BA/20 HR/4 SB
6. **LEFTFIELD**
Hunter Pence
.426 SLG/16 HR/3 SB
7. **SHORTSTOP**
Brandon Crawford
.258 BA/15 HR/4 SB
8. **CENTERFIELD**
Austin Jackson
.264 BA/6 HR/8 SB

→ THE STAFF

1. **LH STARTER**
Madison Bumgarner
13 W/3.73 ERA/1.18 WHIP
2. **RH STARTER**
Johnny Cueto
11 W/3.92 ERA/1.27 WHIP
3. **RH STARTER**
Jeff Samardzija
13 W/3.83 ERA/1.19 WHIP
4. **RH STARTER**
Tyler Beede
2 W/4.38 ERA/1.41 WHIP

FANTASY BREAKOUT



The top 100 prospect with a mid-90s fastball has the biggest upside among the Giants' young starters.

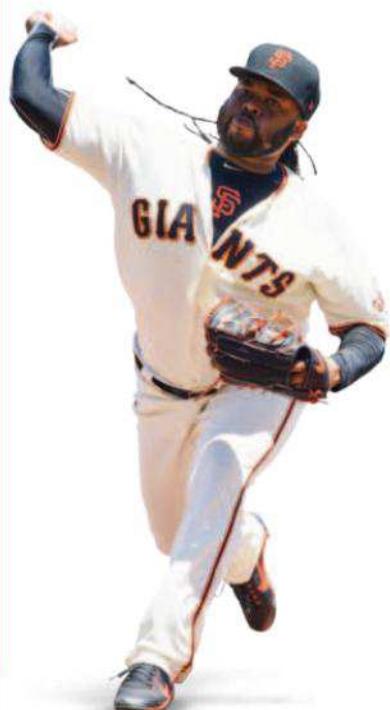
CLOSER RHP
Mark Melancon
22 SV/3.32 ERA/7.9 K9

→ THE SKIPPER

Bruce Bochy

THE PAYOFF PITCH

In a lost season by the Bay, few players were more disappointing than starting pitcher **Johnny Cueto**. After a sixth-place finish in the Cy Young voting in 2016, the righty posted the second-highest ERA of his career (4.52), lost a full mph off his fastball, and missed seven starts with blisters and then forearm tightness. The bad year, coupled with the injury, encouraged Cueto to decline his opt-out clause, leaving him and the Giants together for four more years at \$87 million. Cueto is now the most consequential player on the team. GM **Bobby Evans** patched the offense with trades for **Andrew McCutchen** and **Evan Longoria**, but the starting pitching remains thin and heavily reliant on Cueto to be the starter he was from 2011 through '16.



PADRES



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP SAN DIEGO

I love what they're doing. Players are going to come there in the next few years and the team is going to be really tough. . . . **Eric Hosmer** is a baller. He wears his emotions on his sleeve, he plays the game hard. They couldn't have hung their hat on a better guy. . . . Bringing in Hosmer takes the pressure off **Wil Myers**. He helped start the rebuilding process, now just let him go out and ball. . . . They still don't have a rotation you can trust. They're looking for more command from **Dinelson Lamet**, but it's just an unknown. They'll need some of the vets to help out. . . . **Manuel Margot** is the prototypical leadoff hitter. He's a plus defender, he hits gap-to-gap, he's got some power, and he creates havoc on the bases. . . . **Hunter Renfroe** is a difference-maker with his power. He reminds me of Jethro Bodine from *The Beverly Hillbillies*. . . . The minor league system is ridiculously talented. Their top prospect, **Fernando Tatis Jr.** is a star in the making. When he matures, he'll be in the class of [Carlos] Correa and [Francisco] Lindor. Margot is ready. **Franchy Cordero** looks great. . . . **Andy Green** is a grinder, that's why he's able to relate to players. . . . It's a process—.500 is a realistic goal. It'll be fun watching this organization over the next three or four years.

OVER / UNDER

A team to buy, the Padres made clear upgrades [Eric Hosmer] and should see growth from Dinelson Lamet, Manuel Margot and Hunter Renfroe.

GO.5



THE LINEUP

1. CENTERFIELD **Manuel Margot**
.313 OBP/13 HR/20 SB
2. RIGHTFIELD **Wil Myers**
.466 SLG/27 HR/21 SB
3. FIRST BASE **Eric Hosmer**
.468 SLG/25 HR/6 SB
4. LEFTFIELD **José Pirela**
.264 BA/11 HR/8 SB
5. THIRD BASE **Chase Headley**
.251 BA/10 HR/6 SB
6. SECOND BASE **Carlos Asuaje**
.246 BA/5 HR/4 SB
7. SHORTSTOP **Freddy Galvis**
.253 BA/9 HR/12 SB
8. CATCHER **Austin Hedges**
.404 SLG/16 HR/3 SB

THE STAFF

FANTASY BREAKOUT

1. RH STARTER **Dinelson Lamet**
8 W/4.08 ERA/10.1 K9



In 2017, his debut season, he fanned 139 batters in 114½ innings, with 54 walks. The stuff is there, the control isn't—yet.

2. LH STARTER **Clayton Richard**
10 W/3.90 ERA/1.39 WHP
3. RH STARTER **Bryan Mitchell**
6 W/4.13 ERA/1.39 WHP
4. RH STARTER **Luis Perdomo**
8 W/4.29 ERA/1.44 WHP

CLOSER
Brad Hand
29 SV/3.32 ERA/10.5 K9

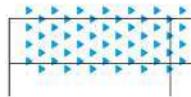
THE SKIPPER

Andy Green

THE PAYOFF PITCH

It's a development year in San Diego, as the team waits for top prospects MacKenzie Gore, Fernando Tatis Jr. and Luis Urias to work their way through the farm system. If you're looking for something fun to watch in the meantime, look out to centerfield, where **Manuel Margot** is probably making a play right now. Margot hit .263 with 13 homers and 17 steals as a rookie, but that was gravy on top of his fantastic range in center. Margot can fly, and that speed means outs. Range-based metrics pegged Margot as a top four centerfielder in the National League in 2017, despite playing just 123 games at that position. He's the best glove man on what will be a much-improved Padres defense this season.





POINT AFTER

CALL ME BY MY NAME

A TARGET OF WORKPLACE HARASSMENT WITH THE MAVERICKS SPEAKS UP

BY MELISSA WEISHAUP

LAST MONTH former Mavericks president Terdema Ussery was presented with allegations that he had sexually harassed multiple women while he held that position. In response he said this: "I am deeply disappointed that anonymous sources have made such outright false and inflammatory accusations against me."

Let's tackle that issue of anonymity. I worked in marketing and game operations for the Mavs from 2010 through '14. I was one of the women Terdema harassed and who spoke to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED for the story. My name is Melissa Weishaupt.

As is the case for so many females, the #MeToo movement has had relevance and resonance for, well, *me too*. I nodded as I read stories about powerful men using their positions of authority to behave inappropriately and then relying on their allies to avoid consequences. I could relate to women who just wanted to do their jobs but who instead had to devote so much time and energy to dealing with predators. I found myself skeptical of owners and CEOs who prided themselves on knowing the most

minute details of their organization but who suddenly claimed to be clueless about a hostile workplace culture.

I also understood why so many women decided not to affix their names to these stories. The critics often ask, "Why do they stay anonymous?" Well. Some fear for their safety. Others don't want to be ostracized. Some don't want to deal with trolls on social media, or they don't want their new coworkers to look at them differently. Personally, I was less concerned for myself than for my family and friends getting any backlash. But now I am reconsidering.

I'm using my name because I'm still not sure the Mavericks get it. Since the story broke, owner Mark Cuban has repeatedly claimed he oversaw only the basketball side of that franchise, not the business side.

Sorry. It doesn't work that way. You own 100% of the team, Mark. The buck stops with you. When I worked on the Mavs' business side, all marketing, promotional and broadcasting decisions went through you. *Nothing* was decided without your approval.

I am using my name because I am convinced that Cuban still doesn't recognize the culture he's helped create or the plight of the women who still work for him. From where I sit, Mark's response was to rush in like some white knight in a T-shirt and jeans and yell, *Don't worry, ladies of the Mavs, I will help you with paid counseling and a hotline you can call!*

Now you want to help? We are not fragile flowers. We don't long for counseling. (As for that hotline: I've spoken with a dozen current and

former team employees; we have no idea what this is or how to find it.) We want equitable pay. We need to be treated with respect. When deserved, we ought to be given the same promotions as our male counterparts.

I'm using my name because I'm encouraged by people like Dirk Nowitzki and Rick Carlisle. After SI's story broke, they didn't duck questions; they didn't blame the victims. Accused of nothing, they still recognized they represented their organization. They showed support for those of us who came forward.

I'm using my name because I want people to understand there are economics tied to this #MeToo movement. We were told at staff meetings: Texas is a right-to-work state. *You have the right to work here; we have the right to fire you.* If you work in fear that you could be fired at any time, you'll be reluctant to complain.

I'm using my name because I know that the human resources department is not always a safe haven. At the Mavericks—and I'm sure elsewhere—HR was there to protect management, not employees. Many workers, especially middle-class and minority workers, do not have a voice or an advocate at their jobs. They should chronicle what happens around them, find a support group outside of work. But they should be cautious in dealing with HR.

Yes, I was harassed while I worked for the Mavericks. But I am using my name now because I will never say that I am a victim. I am tougher. I am wiser. I am my own advocate.

I am Melissa Weishaupt. □



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